

## **Lifting the Lid Off My Heart: Integrating Emotionally Focused Therapy and Christianity in clinical practice**

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*Emotionally-Focused Therapy (EFT) and Christianity can work together to foster healing, despite coming from different world views and having different phenomenological and epistemological ideologies. Through EFT, therapists can help clients stay with and deepen the experience. This emphasis on the experience can then help transform problematic emotion schemes. However, this paper is also about God's capacity and desire to heal through relationships, to help people deal with their histories and come into authentic relating.*

Emotion-Focused therapy (EFT) developed in the late 1980s as an evidence-based short-term<sup>1</sup> treatment for couples, families, and individuals that is embedded in humanistic epistemologies (Elliott, & Greenberg, 2007; McFee & Munroe, 2011). EFT is both a process–experiential therapy<sup>2</sup> and one that embraces a dialectical constructivist approach<sup>3</sup> (McFee et al. 2011; Greenberg & Pascual-Leone, 2001). EFT also adopts aspects of the following: Gestalt therapy, experiential therapy, existential therapy, cognitive, attachment, psychodynamic and narrative theory (Hardin, 2014). Emotions and emotion theory are key components of EFT. Emotions are understood to be biologically-based relational action tendencies that are connected to meaning making, guiding and organizing our lives and are “foundational in the construction of self” (Greenberg, 2014). Emotions have been central to EFT and humanistic, client-centred approaches since their foundation (Greenberg et al. 2001; Greenberg, 2004).

A point of difference with EFT when compared to other therapies is the idea of emotion schemes. Elliott, Watson, Goldman, and Greenberg, L. S. (2004) differentiated emotion schemes from cognitive schemes describing them as “... a process rather than a thing. Emotion scheme processes can include linguistic components but often consist largely or entirely of preverbal elements ... that are not directly available to awareness” (cited in Hardin, 2014, p.25). According to Elliott, Watson, Goldman, and Greenberg (2013), the first component of an emotion scheme is a specific situation or experience triggering an emotional memory. This is followed by physical sensations and bodily expressions connected to emotions. There is then a synthesis of the emotion into internal symbols (visual/verbal) that is then followed by a behavioural response. Thus, a key component of EFT is helping the client to

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<sup>1</sup> Usually eight to twenty sessions.

<sup>2</sup> Which set out to understand what happened in therapy itself, i.e. the process (McFee et al., 2011)

<sup>3</sup> Conscious personal meaning is seen to be... generated by cognitive processes that construct different selves at different times ... and draws on affective experience (Greenberg et al., 2001)

activate, explore and reflect on the emotion schemes. In doing so it is proposed that emotions and therefore emotion schemes that are seen to be problematic for the person can be transformed. This involves not only accessing and working with the schemes but also assessing and working with emotional responses and emotion regulation.

However, working with emotion schemes involves working with an individual's unique development of their emotions, that is their emotional signature<sup>4</sup> and will involve accessing their secondary emotion experience, which Greenberg and Safran (1987) describe as defensive emotional reactions. This can be problematic to get to in a short to medium term therapy, as Webster (2015) points out:

*Individuals who have experienced childhood neglect and trauma develop unique and complex emotional schemes and signatures, and are not able to, let alone wanting to, allow themselves to be vulnerable to another (p. 3).*

Webster established the Institute for Emotionally Focused Therapy in Australia in 1987<sup>5</sup>. The Australian model developed by Webster incorporates longer-term work and draws on psychodynamic therapies to encompass a broader understanding of trauma and the resolution of such. Webster (2007) defined one of the aims of the Institute as:

*... to help individuals develop a state of emotional well-being which involves entitlement to have sentient experience, authentic relating to others, and positive self-experience or positive feelings towards oneself in terms of acceptance, self-worthiness and self-caring, and increased authentic relating (p. 10).*

This aim appealed to me, both as a practitioner and a Christian, particularly the notion of authentic relating. As a therapist, the concept of trying to help people come into their authentic self in the way Webster describes harmonises with my sense of what is needed for people to heal. As a Christian, the Bible not only affirms our being self-

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<sup>4</sup> An individual's emotional pattern of relating (Webster, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> The Institute was formally known as the Counselling Training Centre (NSW), the name changed in 1999 to IEFT.

loving and authentic<sup>6</sup>, it gives us a very clear example of what this would look like through Jesus. As Benner (1992) states “Jesus was much more emotional than most conservative Christians, and in this, he was also the model of psychological maturity and health” (p. 81). Extending this outwards, Jesus’s second command was to “love your neighbour as yourself” (Matthew 22:37–39). The key to this passage being that first we are to love ourselves. Larry Crabb (1984), also embraces this idea:

*The basic personal need of each person is to regard himself as a worthwhile human being ... To accept oneself as a worthwhile creature is absolutely necessary for effective, spiritual, joyful living (p. 53).*

There is another facet to authentic relating, and that is authentic relating with others. The therapeutic relationship is perhaps for some people the first opportunity to begin to experience this, as it has been recognised as a healing in and of itself for a while now (Gelso, 2011). Webster (2015) states, “It is my understanding that Emotion Focused psychotherapy, as a long-term therapy, uses the therapeutic relationship as the mainstay of the healing process” (p. 4). Drawing on its humanistic roots EFT recognises the importance of both the therapeutic relationship and being responsive to the client’s experience. EFT proposes that the therapists’ presence, alongside Rogerian qualities, is an affect regulating bond (Greenberg & Watson, 2006 cited in Greenberg, 2014, p. 350).

It is my belief that it is here that EFT and Christianity share a valuing of relationships. That is, Christians appreciate that God also heals through relationships, starting with his effort to reach us through Jesus. As Yancey (1988) describes “... Jesus offered a long, slow look at the face of God. Making possible an intimacy that had never existed before” (pp. 136–137). Furthermore, the bible reveals many examples of God using people in helping relationships with one another and refers to the body of Christ (the church) as a relational body<sup>7</sup>. Dayringer, (1989) portrays this saying:

*Individuals who benefit from a personal relationship are helped by the love present in it. Nothing is especially transforming about the cold imparting of*

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<sup>6</sup> I am referring to one aspect of authenticity here (i.e. how we behave think and feel). I am aware that for Christians authenticity is also about being reconciled to God.

<sup>7</sup> Moses is a well-known example of God using someone to help many people (see the book of Exodus). For the relational body there are many examples such as, in Romans 12:15 we are encouraged to “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep”. Galations 6:2 adds to this idea with the following statement, ‘Carry each others burdens’.

*truth. People who have been emotionally injured through personal interaction are probably best healed through personal relationship* (p. 29).

Thus, EFT has a lot to offer as an effective, relationally-based therapy for individuals and, as described, some elements tie in nicely with Christianity (e.g. authenticity, the valuing of relationships). However, coming from its humanistic roots, there can be problems for Christians. For example, EFT is said to be holistic yet it does not embrace or talk about spiritual aspects. This can create difficulties for Christians as the world views and underlying phenomenological and epistemological positions are very different. Elliott, Watson, Goldman and Greenberg (2004) refer to EFT as treating the whole person: “Human beings should be treated as whole persons rather than collections of parts, behaviours, or symptoms. Ideal functioning involves awareness and integration of parts or aspects...” (p. 22). And from a constructivist perspective in therapy, the understanding of personal meaning is: cognitive, social constructs, incorporating affect, motivation and behaviour (Greenberg, 2002). Yet, Hardin (2014) discerns that “EFT’s dialectical constructivism, focuses almost exclusively on the temporal experience of the client to the exclusion of the eternal” (p. 330). Furthermore, there is a clear assumption in EFT (arising from its neo-humanistic roots) that people are self-actualising beings born with a tendency towards growth (McFee et al., 2011). This is also at odds with Christianity which would place God, not man at the center of all things<sup>8</sup>.

Thus, despite there being a move towards embracing religious or spiritual aspects in psychology in recent years (Hartz, 2005; McMinn & Dominquez, 2005; Plante & Sherman, 2001 cited in Plante, 2007, p 891), it is still in many ways a difficult marriage. Johnson (2007) points out that, “We are not dealing with two different disciplines – psychology and theology – but with two different communities, each which possesses a distinct psychological literature” (Johnson, 2017, p. 2975 cited in Hardin p. 324). It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into this dilemma, however, for interest in this topic, see, McFee et al. (2011), Mutter (2012), Daalen and Johnson (2011), and Hardin (2014).

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<sup>8</sup> Hardin (2014) states that “humanism tends to exalt creature above creator” (Rom 3:10–12).

As a possible segue between the two ‘communities’, I find McFee et al.’s (2011) proposal helpful, in that they state that “An EFT informed Christian psychology would employ a strong experiential emphasis allowing for a more expansive knowledge and incorporation of historic Christian practices” (p. 326). With these ideas in mind, I would like to share with you a little of my journey with a client by the name of Freya<sup>9</sup>, as I believe it will demonstrate how Christianity and EFT can work to bring about healing in someone’s life. I believe this demonstrates the idea of a “strong experiential emphasis, as well as expansion and incorporation of historic Christian practices<sup>10</sup>”.

Freya came to me nearly two years ago, in her late 40s. She presented with what she termed “stuff that hadn’t been dealt with.” This “stuff” was stirred up by being ostracised at work, leading to her feeling invisible. She explained to me that feeling invisible was a well-known feeling to her throughout her life. As she expanded on this issue Freya also spoke about her history, which included: eating disorders, divorce, marriage problems, being the eldest of six children whom she was made to carry responsibility for (her parents were both alcoholics). She spoke about being beaten, a lack of nurture and the high expectations that she had always had placed on her<sup>11</sup>. This was quite a lot of information for me to take in during the first session, but Freya also added that she “saw a little girl, waiting to be noticed who had spent lots of dark days locked up.” She also mentioned a teenager around 13 years old and that he (God) was saying to her, “there was more that the 13-year-old was carrying”. She also stated that she felt that God was “lifting the lid of my heart”. Further, she had come to see me to help with these matters, as my name “kept coming up”<sup>12</sup>.

As an EFT therapist and Christian, I sat comfortably with what Freya was saying and her feelings of being led to me to do some trauma work. It is not unusual for me to see Christian clients and a large part of my work is long-term psychotherapy, working with complex trauma. It is also not unusual for me to see clients who come with a scripture or word, even picture or dream that they believe God has given them that holds a particular meaning or message for them.

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<sup>9</sup> Freya is a pseudonym.

<sup>10</sup> I would consider these to be issues such as prayer, repentance, forgiveness and such like. For example, there were sessions where Freya would spontaneously pray, and at least on one occasion where she wanted to repent.

<sup>11</sup> Later sessions also revealed sexual abuse.

<sup>12</sup> She later told me, it kept jumping off the page.

Having said that, something did feel different about working with Freya. As we started working I noticed that at the start of each session, Freya would usually have something to say about what God had told her he wanted us to address in the session. For example, at the start of session three, Freya told me that she had been thinking about the thirteen-year-old on the way down and she got the word “rocks<sup>13</sup>.” She added that the girl was standing there, watching and she knew what was under the rocks.<sup>14</sup> A few sessions later, she came with another – “one hit”. This led to a recovered memory of her being king hit at age 13, which caused a part of her to split off.<sup>15</sup> Freya would come in sometimes with statements like “I’ve been told we need to dig deeper to get to the abandonment”, or “there’s going to be something about a blanket today that will be important”. I would argue that this is not normally how counselling sessions would start, and the question it raised for me was, how was I going to respond. How do you respond?

Normally a counselling relationship is between the client and the therapist, and you could argue the relationship, also known as the analytic third (Ogden, 1994). In this situation, it felt very much like it was the therapist, the client and God in the room each session<sup>16</sup>. In fact, it felt very much like God was leading the process by giving direction for the session and actively intervening throughout the session. By intervening I mean that it was also not unusual for Freya to tune into and speak out words from the Holy Spirit whilst we were working. For example:

*Freya: (talking about a drawing she had done in session 6) There’s a shell around the thing – like a nut. I’m hearing that I was: scolded as a child, it dampened my spirit, my heart weighed heavy, a hole began to happen in my heart, my life wasn’t joyful, as a child resentment started growing inside, it became hate, I became insular, all about self, it started growing, was self-protective, at the same time it damaged my emotions...*

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<sup>13</sup> Freya was referring to a word from God. For Christians, these would be included in the gifts concerning the mind. For example, words of wisdom, words of knowledge, and discerning spirits (Corinthians 12:7–12, NKJV)

<sup>14</sup> Over several sessions, this led to memories of an episode of sexual assault and subsequent verbal abuse from her mother. Freya reported always feeling emotionally cut off from her mother, wanting her but her never being there.

<sup>15</sup> Splitting refers to a defense mechanism where things are dealt with by compartmentalizing (Penguin Dictionary of Psychology, 2009, p. 765)

<sup>16</sup> I am not saying that this is a unique experience to me as a therapist.

The Holy Spirit can be understood (in part) to be a teacher given to believers after Christ's death. In John 14:26 Jesus said: "But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (New King James Version, 1982). The Holy Spirit is, therefore, present to guide memory, interpretation and inspiration. Dayringer (1989, p. 30), states that "the Holy Spirit is always at work in a relationship, especially in the communication gap that exists between the minister<sup>17</sup> and the counselee" (p. 30). Corbett-Jones (1984) talks about the work of the Holy Spirit as one that is "directed towards someone becoming complete or whole making the process one that considers every aspect of the person – body, mind, emotions, and relationships".

However, it would be misleading to assume the Holy Spirit is limited to working with just the client. Eck (2002) speaks about the assumption of the Holy Spirit being present in Christian counselling and the Spirit being attentive to both the counsellor and the client. Eck also states that "the therapist should be sensitive to and aware of the Holy Spirit's guidance in themselves and the client, using spiritual interventions only in concert with the leading of the Holy Spirit" (p. 272). I would agree with this but also note that it can be tricky to incorporate this into the work and requires a lot of reflection, discernment and consideration of ethics.

At this point I was feeling a little tense as the session felt like they were moving at a faster pace than usual. I would not normally work with a client this quickly. My preference is to go slowly and build a safe therapeutic relationship, get to know the client and how they present and get affected (or not) by hearing their story. At the same time, I could tell Freya was ready and wanted to do the work.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, she articulated she had a sense that God wanted to prepare her for something ministry related. Further to that, God seemed to be steering the direction we took by giving Freya something to look at each session. One of the assumptions of EFT is to integrate the "being" and the "doing" which results in a style of following and guiding (Elliott et al., 2007). To ease my anxiety and wanting to work congruently, I aimed to follow Freya carefully by observing her moment to moment experiences whilst checking in with her and contracting regularly as we worked. I was also watching her

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<sup>17</sup> She had done some counselling previously and had prayer ministry and knew that she wanted to do further work

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responses to what was coming up so that I could slow the work down if needed. In this sense, I was embracing what McFee et al. (2011) refer to as the “capacity of the therapist to accurately recognise markers” and doing what Elliott et al. (2007) describe as constantly monitoring “the state of the therapeutic alliance and the current therapeutic tasks in order to judge the best balance of active stimulation with responsive attunement” (p. 4). I also invited feedback and she reassured me that we were where she wanted us to be.

Freya and I developed a way of working together that usually involved working with something given to her by God. Be it a word, pictures (e.g. clouds,<sup>19</sup> a light globe,<sup>20</sup> and a diamond<sup>21</sup> are some of the images Freya came in with), somatic feeling (e.g. in session 12 she felt a digging feeling inside<sup>22</sup>) and words before, and or during the session. At times, I wondered what Freya needed from me as it seemed she could readily tune into the Holy Spirit and uncover a wealth of information and/or experiences. For example, Freya came into session 17 with this reflection, having spent time with God, “After the last session, because of the abandonment [from her mother], it had effects on my body, which is being reversed. God said:

*The pain is a symptom of going through hurts and traumas, that it covers true identity as we go inwards. The body can't take the weight. The bones are also affected. Abandonment causes an inward turn, a weight on the bones. Now scaling is happening. There's room for stuff to come out of the system. I'm enlarging you on the inside and impurities are coming to the surface. Hurts and traumas are coming to the surface.”*

I wrestled with the question – what did she need from me? However, I also held onto the knowledge that Freya was coming for a reason and that something else was needed to help her understand what God was giving her. I also understood that Freya needed a nurturing relationship from me. I began to realise my place as I stayed with her in her experience and invited her to stay with, explore or deepen different parts of it. For example, I would do things like ask her to draw some part of her experience or

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<sup>19</sup> This was linked to shame.

<sup>20</sup> Something for the future and specifically the next two years, session 10.

<sup>21</sup> Session 9 and meaning more clarity was coming, for vision and insight.

<sup>22</sup> Freya stated in the session that the funnel related to generational abandonment, hers, her mothers and her grandmothers.

feelings as they came up in session or an image that she came in with. I would direct her attention to certain parts of the drawing or felt experience. For example, in session 2, Freya did a drawing to explore an empty space feeling, and could see hungry child parts that were wanting and needing a mother to hold onto. Freya contacted deep feelings of sadness and loss as she expressed through tears, “I have missed out.”

As we continued working in this way with Freya, I realised I was falling back on all that I value in EFT. Specifically, the respectful ways of being with clients, balancing the doing and being, helping Freya to become aware of and feel into problem areas in her life. By working relationally, I helped her come into contact with deeply buried primary and self-feelings, and to start the journey of focusing and re-experiencing that allows for healing.

Focusing work is attributed to Gendlin (1974, 1981, 1984) and has been incorporated into EFT as a six-step protocol (Greenberg, et al. 1993, cited in Webster, 2016 p. 16). Gendlin describes focusing as looking for the unclear felt sense (1996), and that by creating a space internally the client can gain clarity through the allowing of the experience. Greenberg, Rice and Elliott (1993) also state that the “felt sense” emerges from emotion schemes that are accessed through attending to internal experience. The felt sense which is “multi-determined by many modalities and modes of processing, such as auditory, visual, kinesthetic, emotional, and semantic...” (Greenberg & Pascual-Leone, 2001, p. 175). As described by Webster, (2016) “focusing is about ...discovering, acknowledging and touching into the experience that is felt” (p. 2). I would add though, that this took on an extra dimension with the work of the Holy Spirit.

In session 9, Freya came in saying she had been given a picture of a diamond and a message that there was more clarity to come. We were talking about Freya being king hit, and the deep hole it left in her head that she didn’t receive any care for. We were not quite halfway through the session when Freya said:

Freya: I just felt the Holy Spirit saying “this is significant today”. I guess it’s, I’m saddened. (Crying) I’ve never really felt it, hard to talk about, but today I have and I’m not sure why.

- Therapist: When you talked about it before were you talking from here [points to head], or here [points to heart]?
- Freya: Thinking, not the heart.
- Therapist: Okay, so you're connecting back to some of it and feeling the feeling. Can you label the feeling; what it is you're feeling?
- Freya: Um, I'm getting the word "shocked", I was shocked – I think there's something in that, that has not been dealt with. But um, feeling cause ah, I don't think I ever talked about my feelings when I was younger.
- Therapist: It wouldn't have been safe too.
- Freya: I've never been able to talk to other people before about my feelings, not at a deep level, cause I've been so traumatised and frozen – I'm getting the word.
- Therapist: Yeah.
- Freya: There's a part that's frozen and can't connect – I'm just seeing something that represents a part of me, frozen and just closed and little lightening is coming out of there.
- Therapist: So much is happening, are you okay? [Freya nods yes] What are you in touch with inside?
- Freya: I have a sense of the frozen part and the eight-year-old, that had been hurt from the bashings. She's frozen on the inside and it links back to the little one.
- Therapist: What do you see?
- Freya: It's more feeling this time. It's interesting, on the way down I felt God saying that's where he wanted to go today – to the frozen part. It's a hard part, inside is soft in the middle but the outer edges are hard and it's boiling on the inside – that's words from the Holy Spirit. [Teary and getting distressed] It's going to explode.
- Therapist: It's okay, you're okay [giving space]. What is it boiling with?
- Freya: Anger, it's hard all around my belly. It feels like something will come up to here [points to throat], it's a link to my past. There's a depth it's a link to my mother's abandonment<sup>23</sup>. It's kind of like this hard part is

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<sup>23</sup> The link was about her mother also being abused couldn't mother Freya and held her at a distance.

enclosed in the abandonment and it's starting to get tight here [points to belly].

Therapist: What's the feeling of tightness? Stay with it.

Freya: It's hurt, all the name calling.

Sue: Yeah.

Freya: And unbelief that someone could do that to you.

Therapist: Do what to you?

Freya: All the name calling, the bashings.

Therapist: And the hurt does it have a colour, shape or size?

Freya: I can't see it but I feel it's blue.

[Freya keeps talking about the tightness around her belly describing it in more detail]

Therapist: And is there anything you would want to say to it, or ask it?

Freya: What are you? I guess. Why are you there?

Therapist: And does it have an answer for you?

Freya: Yeah, there's a frail, sick looking part. It's had enough and it's just shut down – it's had enough.

Therapist: Shut down? When it was at eight, two or both?

Freya: I'm getting a sense of two. It tried to grow but had been locked away and it's starting to go deeper I feel.

Therapist: Yeah, stay with it – what does that mean, it's going deeper.

Freya: A sense of depth too, it's been there a long time, and things are being noticed now.

Therapist: The two-year-old part that tried to grow.

Freya: It's like it tried to live but it couldn't because it was stuck. And it was stuck in a part of life that wasn't nurtured 'cause it was locked away. It was stuck in some filth [crying]. She's saying: "He hurt me, he was a strange man, he had terrible eyes and was lanky".

Therapist: How old was she?

Freya: His hands were big.

Therapist: I hear you, big hands, terrible eyes. He's scary.

Freya: He called me, I hear his voice calling looking for me...<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Freya went on to recall she had been sexually abused by her grandfather

These are but a few examples of many sessions that have followed a similar pattern over a two-year period to date. Freya and I are still on the journey together, as simply put, abandonment and complex trauma takes time to heal. At this point in time Freya states that she has “a new strength, more vision, and a more authoritative stance”. Her work situation has also improved and she is not feeling so invisible. She is beginning to heal. What I have tried to demonstrate in my work with Freya is that EFT and Christianity, although coming from “different communities”, can work in a powerful and collaborative way to help bring healing and wholeness to individuals. I agree with McFee et al. (2011) and their suggestion that this would be best done by “employ[ing] a strong experiential emphasis” (p. 326). I believe this also creates space for the allowing of experience that facilitates healing. EFT enables me to help people stay with and deepen their experience. In doing so, problematic emotion schemes can be transformed. However, I have also tried to demonstrate how God heals through relationship. By giving space for my client Freya to be connected with God, as he spoke to her through the Holy Spirit, I believe it facilitated the work in ways that go beyond what is normally understood to occur in a counselling session.

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