



Lasting Change: *Moving from anxiety, depression and chronic emptiness into greater trust of self & other through the lens of Accelerated Experiential Dynamic Psychotherapy (AEDP)*

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The Spring Melt

In the vast whiteness snowflakes fall,
accumulating in drifts. Until crack--
shattered ice, it flows. Physics
is powerless here, even with all its laws.
There is nothing more true than that which is, is.
Follow the flood of formulas back to its source--
this trickles out.

If the grip is too tight, all the blood flees.
The white is striking. Frost sets in.
Some days it is so cold, breath is impossible.
Lie down together on the barren earth.
Implore the thaw. Then wait. Arc
our arms and legs: a childish game,
but it impresses the snow.

Every day a thousand deaths. Snowflakes
are lost upon the tongue and never spoken of again.
You and I fail to meet. The invading army of ants
suffers many casualties in the kitchen, yet no one
plants crosses in a field for them. Poppies
do not celebrate these losses. No one does.
Even the infinitesimal has weight.

In the springtime, look, see
what emerges. Timid, unfurling, it blanches
to think of its fate beneath the blade. Still,
it yearns, stretches toward the warm sun.
It knows neither green nor brown.
Up and down are meaningless.
It knows only the hope of heat.

Weaving - the poem, AEDP and a case

As a therapist, I am deeply interested in how lasting change is fostered through the therapeutic relationship. What is it that enables a client not just to feel better or worse after a session, but to heal,

transform and move through life with greater ease? While holding this question and a client—a vibrant, courageous woman whom I will call Anna*—in mind, I wrote the above poem. When I allowed my left-brain (in broad brushstrokes, the home of language, logic, critical thinking and explicit memory) to analyze and integrate what had first emerged from an unstudied, right-brained place (the home of emotion, intuition, creativity, and implicit/felt-sense memory again in broad brushstrokes), I found the poem had a great deal to offer about transformation in therapy generally.

As the poem begins, the world is pale and frozen. Often those who have experienced early attachment wounding (injuries inflicted by a caregiver whether in the form of abuse, neglect, or a more subtle denying of the child's worth) live a life that feels deadened or muted (Wallin, 2007). Anna entered therapy wanting relief from chronic depression and substance abuse and to process early childhood relational trauma. She complained of having relationships that felt both hollow and unmanageable. In our clients, as in the winter, the fertile ground of authentic connection is always present, and can be contacted at any time. However, contact can be difficult, as there are layers of drifting snow or behaviors that either promote a feeling of safety, but come at the expense of feeling terribly alone, or allow for connection, but at the cost of sacrificing one's sense of self.

As a therapist, it is possible to contact the fertile ground, the "self-at best," right from the beginning of a therapy relationship (Fosha, 2000a, 2006). A secure attachment template is wired into, and available in, all of us. In the right circumstances, this secure attachment template can be activated in the first moments of meeting (Fosha, 2000a). Anna and I were able to connect in the first session around her courage at coming in and seeking help. Typically, she felt most comfortable in the position of offering help to others, not receiving it. From our found connection, she shared with me how she thought things might play out between us, if she allowed herself to follow her typical patterns. She stated she would likely come to therapy for a while, and then, the first time she did something she thought I might not like, she would be gone, without a phone call and without a look back. She shared that this is exactly what happened with two previous therapists.

I worked with the courageous part of her that was in my office wanting to heal. I asked this part if she might give me the benefit of the doubt when this situation presented itself, as it surely would, and at least check in with me before leaving. She agreed. When Anna forgot our fourth session, we made phone contact later that day, and she shared she never would have dared to make the call but for our conversation. Despite our phone conversation, Anna came to the next session half-expecting to face, in her words, "a rageful, shaming tirade." My actual reaction was again to be amazed at her courage. It took courage to call, to come in, to look at my face to see what I actually felt about her and not to remain with what she imagined I felt.

"Crack" a new experience occurs, something different that allows for energy release and greater flow. These events are often a moment of "quantum transformation" where, in an instant, the client steps out of one way of being and into another (Fosha, 2006). Over and over, during the course of therapy, Anna and I have experienced these moments where something completely different, and good, occurs. "The goal of AEDP is to provide the patient with an experience. The fostering and provision of new and healing emotional experiences is AEDP's method and its aim" (Fosha, 2004, p.33).

In this instance, Anna, who had defended against her vulnerability for her entire life by projecting an image of competence and self-sufficiency and who, wherever possible, left relationships if such image crumbled, felt safe enough in our therapeutic relationship to tolerate a new possibility. Together, as

* Certain details of Anna's history, including her name, have been changed to protect her anonymity.

we worked to allow her to withstand the foreignness of this encounter and the anxiety it caused, her experience in that moment became radically different from her past experiences and her expectations: she was able to be imperfect, remain connected to herself and connect to me, all at once. My acceptance of Anna, including that she missed a session without calling, enabled Anna to move into contact with this imperfect part of herself and not cut off both that “messy” (her word) part and me, the witnessing other. Instead, she was able to take in my care for her and my ability to tolerate even her “messiness.” She became at the same time “messy” and loveable. Suddenly, an upwelling of tears sprung forth in Anna as if from nowhere. This experience tapped into deep grief at not having been able to feel both imperfect and lovable so many times before.

“There is nothing more true than that which is, is.” At the outset you don’t need to understand or intellectually explain a new experience in therapy, just allow it. Physics is not what causes the moment in the spring when the ice cracks open and water flows. It can understand it later, but what holds the initial power is the experience itself (Fosha, 2000a). Anna allowed whatever she experienced in the moment to come forward, and together we stayed with it as it shifted from fear into a deepening trust in our connection and my capacity to bear her vulnerability and imperfection. We did not stop to parse out each step. We did eventually talk about how we came to experience our feeling of connection and how her feeling connected to me and her grief were related, but only well after the experience itself had moved through her so that she had a lived sense of it first, before her mind worked to make sense of the experience. As we increasingly open to and allow what is – what is our experience, what is our relationship with another and what is unfolding around us– we stop using energy to resist and open to a greater truth (Kabat Zinn, 1994). This greater truth may be painful or delightful. Its hallmark is that it is dynamic and changes from moment to moment (Fosha, 2000a).

The second stanza speaks to how entrenched our patterns can be and how early relational trauma can leave the world a cold and barren place. When we are frozen in our fixed ideas of how the world works and our rigid ways of being in the world, the life is taken out of each new moment. These moments are seen as repetitions of the past, rather than for the new possibilities they present, and we meet them with fixed expectations and actions (Lamanga, 2011, Wallin, 2007). We become immobilized in painful experience after painful experience, just as Anna was stuck in disconnection, depression and a life-long pattern of projecting an image of competence and leaving (either literally, or through distancing behavior where actual leaving was implausible) the moment this facade broke down.

At times even *“breath is impossible.”* During instances of trauma, there is often a shut down – a movement from fight or flight into freeze, a reaction governed by the oldest of three neurological circuits (Pando-Mars, 2011, Porges, 2009). Later, we can go through life, frequently revisiting this “frozen place,” even when there is no outside threat (Pando-Mars, 2011). Almost all possibility can be shut down by our rigid beliefs and behaviors, beliefs and behaviors that were formed at first to protect us from a cruel or unresponsive early environment, but often fail to serve us later in life.

As our work deepened, Anna and I repeatedly came into contact with her firmly held conviction that she was broken or fundamentally flawed and, therefore, could not ever be in a romantic relationship or in deep connection with anyone. Here, in these moments where everything feels stuck and impossible, the therapist models her capacity to be with the unbearable and invites the client over and over to join her. Bit by bit, Anna was able to stay in the moment, not dissociate, and take in more and more of my feeling her authenticity, which I would name whenever it was evoked by her. I would invite her into deeper contact, and she could accept or rebuff, my invitation.

“Being with” an experience is not too close or too tight; there is playfulness that develops so that each experience is approached in reverence and yet lightly. Play with, and delight in, the client engages the newest neural circuit, the ventral vagal complex or “social engagement system” (Pando-Mars, 2011, Porges, 2009). In the poem, this playfulness shows up both in the act of making snow angels (typically a childhood pursuit) and in the double meaning given to the word “*impress*.” In our work together, I frequently delighted in Anna, and let her know what specifically delighted me. Over time, Anna and I would laugh together, enjoying wherever she was, whether that be more distant or in closer connection. All of this served to allow Anna, at her own pace, to open to her own capacity to connect with herself, with me and with others (Pando-Mars, 2011).

In the third stanza of the poem, we see that when we open to the experiences of each little moment, there is much to be gained. In allowing each and every loss to be felt rather than pushed away, there is room for new experience and healing. Losses, and other dissociated experiences, accumulate over a lifetime, and are known to a client on a felt, intuitive level, but when they have never been put into language, they are an “unthought known” and are unavailable to the conscious mind (Bollas, 1987).

The most poignant of the losses in the poem, for me, is the failure of two people to meet. The processing of ruptures between the therapist and client, as well as opening to the experience of other seemingly small moments where a client has been hurt or unseen by another, can lead the therapeutic dyad into far weightier experiences (Fosha, 2000a). With Anna, we stayed one session with her hand resting on an ache in her heart, and what that ache wanted to say. At first, this ache did not want to say anything to me because of a rupture that had occurred a few sessions back, of which I hadn’t been aware. We stayed with the pain of my having missed a key piece of what had been related that prior session, and we were able to repair the disconnection. Focusing on one non-verbal piece of communication can change the entire conversation (Pando-Mars, 2011, Prenn, 2011). The experience of catching snowflakes on your tongue is a visceral one, experienced in the moment and almost never put into words. Equally, gestures, glances, and other non-verbal events in our day to day lives are made and often taken in by a receiving other, but are rarely attended to in a conscious way by the two people who are interacting. However, putting such experiences into words can be illuminating and convey far more than is first assumed to be there (Fosha, 2000a, Prenn, 2010).

When the pain of our rupture eased, the ache in Anna’s heart returned and spoke. At first, the pain appeared to be related to a relatively small annoyance with a man she was casually dating and her feeling of powerlessness when he chose to leave before she was ready to have him go. We continued to pay attention to the ache, and Anna was suddenly reminded of another time when she was seven years old, and a much bigger ache came forward, the ache of the death of her sister and the guilt she held around the loss. She had held back her tears at the time because her parents had presented a stoic front and did not help her with her emotions, and she followed their lead and just ignored the grief she did not have the capacity to manage alone. Touching into this ache brought with it racking sobs and we went through many waves of tears. Anna was finally able to grieve a loss she had spent years containing and avoiding. Staying with a gesture or a small annoyance can open to much greater experience. Allowing, and paying attention to whatever presents, no matter how small gives rise to healing moments.

Ultimately, we arrive at the conclusion: “*even the infinitesimal has weight.*” This thought, in the poem, follows the experience the losses, and there is an integration of feeling and comprehension that occurs. AEDP, developed through meticulous study of video-recorded sessions, provides a comprehensive model to facilitate healing and lasting change through the therapeutic relationship.

This model involves, in its most simple form, (1) providing a new, good experience for the client, (2) undoing “unwilled and unwanted aloneness” (Fosha, 2003, p.242), (3) allowing the client to experience emotions, previously thought to be unbearable, while relying on the therapist as a regulating resource and (4) processing these emotions to completion so that the action tendencies that are entrained by each emotion can be released (Fosha, 2005). This process is achieved in part by bringing the right brain of the client into contact with the right brain of the therapist to allow the client to have new experiences in the moment, and then allowing the client’s left brain to understand what happened, so that rigid notions of self, other and the world can begin to be revised to include these new experiences (Fosha, 2000a). With Anna, we circled back, and noticed together how her hand on her heart and our attending to a seemingly minor miscue between us, had led to an opening where she felt me present with her and could grieve a huge loss that she had not previously allowed herself to grieve because of the extent to which she held herself culpable.

In the poem’s final stanza, everything has come together, healing occurs, and something wondrous comes forth. It is resilient, paradoxically, because it is in touch with its tenderness and its vulnerability. We all carry an innate longing for connection (Fosha, 2000a, 2010). When connection is not available in our childhood, we often deny this longing or place it onto other things – sex, substances, etc. (Levine, 2010). Once we move away from the denial and the substitution of addiction and reawaken this pure, natural longing to be connected, labels cease to matter. Up and down become meaningless, as we are connected, and what is in that shared space often defies language. There is a truth deeper than labels that comes from integrating knowledge and experience and processing the process of change itself (Fosha, 2000a). As our work progressed, Anna touched into a core truth around her essential worthiness and how much she needs and deserves connection. Finally, she felt the “*hope of heat*” instead of only feeling the desire to withdraw into the safety of aloneness.

In the AEDP model, when experience is able to be fully allowed and then understood, ultimately a deep knowing emerges (Fosha, 2005). This knowledge, and the experience of hope, is enough for the sapling to continue to grow, trusting in its natural unfolding and its capacity to meet each moment. Anna’s journey is not complete, and she has experienced fundamental changes. The depression and substance abuse she presented with have resolved. In addition, Anna has remained in the same city now four times longer than anywhere else she has lived as an adult; she has developed supportive friendships; and she has entered into a new romantic relationship where she is experimenting with allowing her own vulnerability to be seen.

For those who suffer from childhood attachment injuries, the change that occurs through psychotherapy often looks like increased trust in oneself, one’s experience and one’s capacity as well as developing a greater ability to discern when to trust others and building deepening trust in certain worthy others. As trust in one’s self and others grows, so does hope. Over and over, the therapist helps a client approach, and then bear, her experiences. “This is an intrapsychic and interpersonal endeavor...” (Prenn, 2010, p. 309). As the client accumulates these relational experiences, slowly, she comes to believe in her capacity to bear the unbearable and begins to trust that her experience, in its sum total, can be borne. “In an environment where one’s emotions are affirmed, scaffolded, and shared by the other, it becomes safe to be oneself and to explore all sorts of intense, difficult feelings, without fear of being overwhelmed (the other is there to support) or of being shamed (the other is there, accepting) (Fosha, 2004, p.38). People who entered therapy with long-term anxiety, chronic depression, or a lasting generalized sense of emptiness (all complaints that can result from attachment wounding), often experience significant improvement in these conditions.

When improvement becomes lasting change, even in stressful situations, the client has gained greater trust in herself and her capacities and greater trust of others and their desire to help. Thus, she often is able to weather the stressful experience in a new way that furthers her sense of her self and the world. In the event that the stressor is so great it throws her back into older patterns of thought and behavior, the newer experiences still remain as a poignant reminder that she is capable of trust, connection and hope. Over time, this client is increasingly able to meet life with excitement and curiosity about what comes next and a deeper capacity to absorb the more difficult events that inevitably are part of her life's journey.

For more information on AEDP please see the AEDP website: www.aedpinstitute.org.

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