

DE-ESCALATION & CYCLE MAPPING

A Stage 1 Practice Worksheet & Clinical Guide



North Carolina Community for
Emotionally Focused Therapy (NCCEFT)

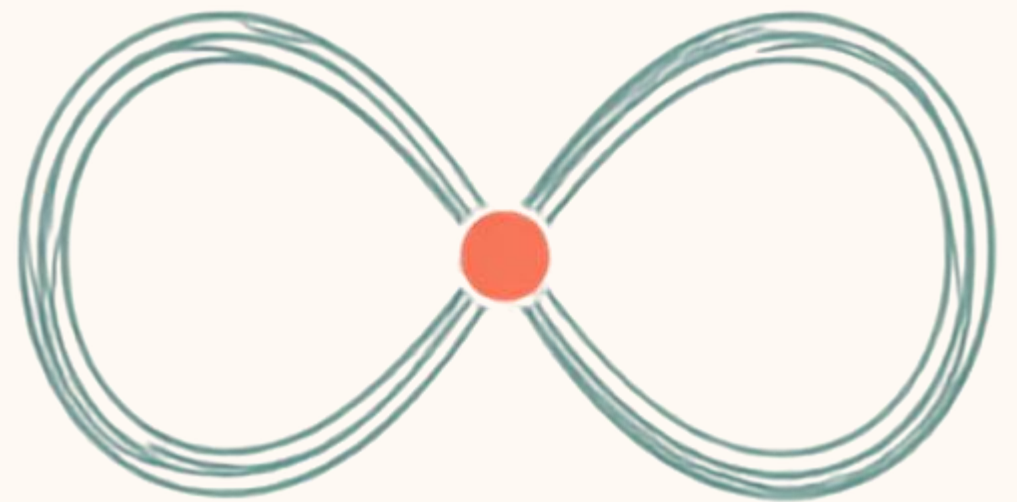


Based on the Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFCT)
model developed by Dr. Sue Johnson



CLINICAL GOAL

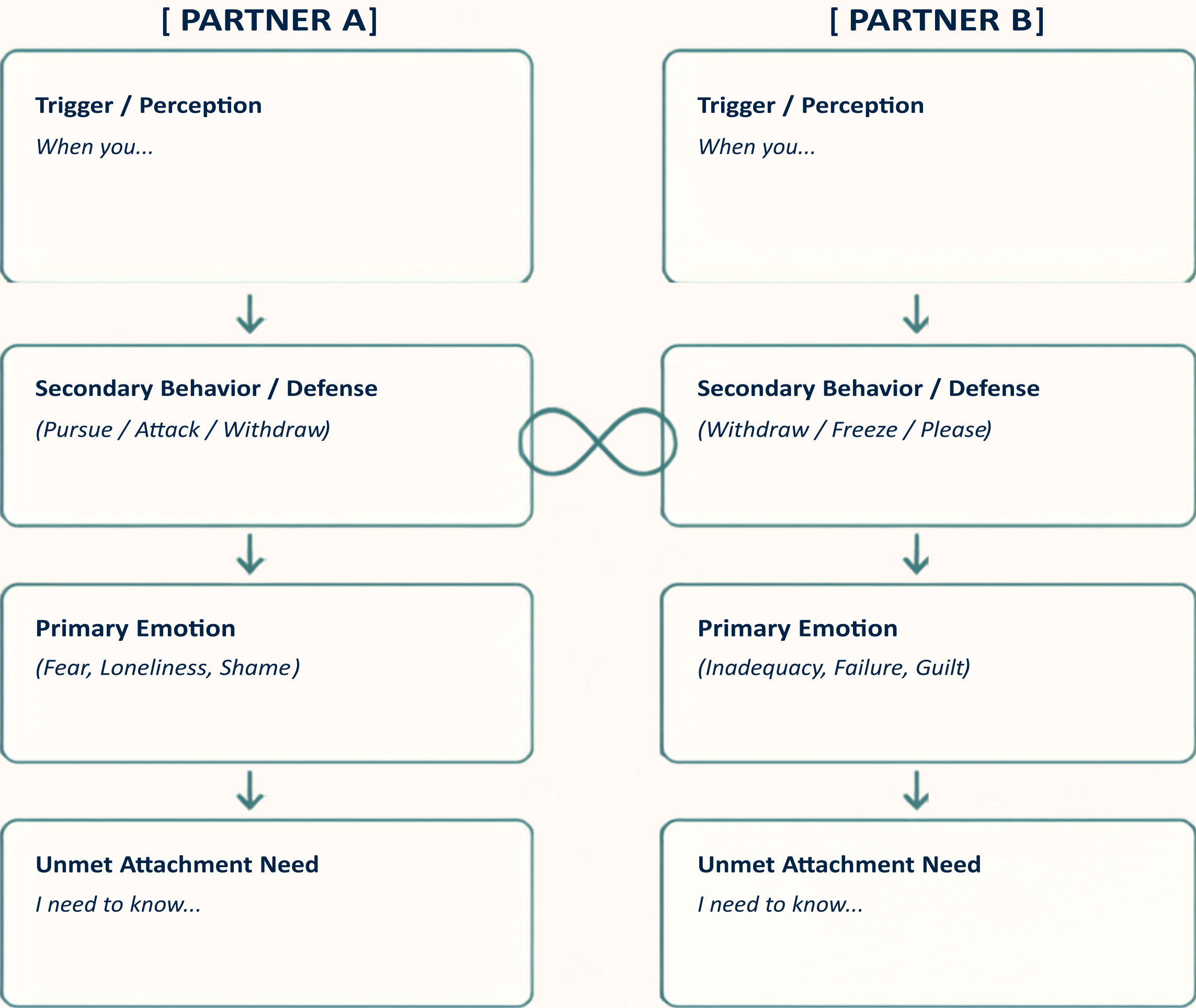
In Stage 1 of EFCT, the therapist's primary task is to help the couple identify, map, and externalize their negative interactional cycle. By framing the cycle as the common enemy, partners step out of blame and begin to recognize how their protective defenses inadvertently trigger each other's attachment fears.



1.

THE INFINITY LOOP CYCLE MAPPER

Use this template to track and diagram the couple's repeating pattern in real-time or as a session recap tool.



2. THE CYCLE TRACKING WORKSHEET



PARTNER A

1 Trigger Event: 'When my partner...'
(e.g., turns away, raises their voice, stays late at work, goes quiet)

2 Perception / Meaning: 'The story I tell myself is...'
(e.g., 'I don't matter,' 'I feel like I'm in this alone,' 'They don't care about me')

3 Secondary Reactive Behavior: 'So on the outside, I...'
(e.g., push for answers, criticize, demand attention, shut down)

4 Primary Underlying Emotion: 'Underneath that reaction, I secretly feel...'
(e.g., terrified of being abandoned, lonely, overwhelmed, small)

5 Core Attachment Need: 'What I truly long for in that moment is...'
(e.g., to feel prioritized, to know you are in my corner, reassurance)

2. THE CYCLE TRACKING WORKSHEET

PARTNER B

1

Trigger Event: ‘When my partner...’

(e.g., brings up an issue, looks disappointed, questions my actions)

2

Perception / Meaning: ‘The story I tell myself is...’

(e.g., ‘I’m failing,’ I can never get it right,’ I’m about to be attacked’)

3

Secondary Reactive Behavior: ‘So on the outside, I...’

(e.g., explain/defend, walk away, go numb, minimize the issue)

4

Primary Underlying Emotion: ‘Underneath that reaction, I secretly feel...’

(e.g., inadequate, helpless, paralyzed, ashamed)

5

Core Attachment Need: ‘What I truly long for in that moment is...’

(e.g., acceptance, to know I’m good enough for you, peace)

3.

EMOTIONAL VOCABULARY BANK

When clients struggle to identify primary emotions, use these distinctions to help them shift from surface reactions to core vulnerability.

 Secondary Defenses (Surface Reactions)	 Primary Emotions (Underlying Vulnerability)
Frustrated, Annoyed, Outraged	Scared, Panicked, Terrified
Defensive, Resentful, Bitter	Unimportant, Invisible, Forgotten
Distant, Cold, Numb	Lonely, Isolated, Disconnected
Sarcastic, Critical, Blaming	Ashamed, Inadequate, Failures
Self-Righteous, Guarded, Rigid	Sad, Grieving, Hurt



4. CLINICAL REFRAMING SCRIPTS FOR STAGE 1

Use these 4 standardized templates to externalize the cycle during live sessions:



The Common Enemy Refrain:

“Neither of you is the villain here. The enemy is this cycle—the way your fear of losing each other spins you both around until Partner A pushes out of panic, and Partner B pulls away to protect the relationship.”



Naming the Pursuit-Withdraw Dynamics:

“The more you [Partner B] pull away to keep the peace, the more alone [Partner A] feels, which makes them reach harder. And the harder they reach, the more overwhelmed you feel. You are both stuck in this loop together.”



Validating the Protective Stance:

“Your withdrawal isn’t because you don’t care—it’s your way of trying to stop things from getting worse. And your anger isn’t just criticism—it’s a protest against losing the person you love.”



Shifting to Attachment Meaning:

“This fight wasn’t actually about the dishes or the schedule. It was about a deeper question both of you are asking: ‘Are you there for me?’”