

Engaging Clients Fearlessly

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A woman in her forty's once was sharing an experience that happened to her at about age eight. I have been doing this work for many years and the level of violence and pain this eight-year-old child suffered was the worst I had ever heard. Be grateful for the lack of details. She was sexually, physically, and emotional brutalized while being forced to watch and participate in the same assaults on others. At some point in the telling of her story I began to cry. It is not unusual for me to cry with clients. My rule is: if I will laugh with a client, I will cry with them. But in this situation, my own upset continued to increase as the details of her horrific suffering became too much for even my seasoned sensibilities. At the point that I was crying so hard that I was no longer able to listen, I stopped her and treated myself with Thought Field Therapy (TFT). Once I had reduced my own upset from this vicarious traumatization, she continued to tell the rest of the details of this event. I was able to attend to her needs in helping her with her overwhelming feelings with TFT. I was also able to help her by being a witness to the violence she experienced and guide her in making sense of these events and her life.

In the past before I learned TFT, I would have stopped her from telling me that story. I know that even as skilled and committed as I am to helping others I would have found a reason to avoid these powerful feelings and protect myself. My excuse may have been that it was too much for her to continue. Or, I might have suggested she needed to process these events piece by piece and we should stop and process this first part before going on. Through my emotional responses she may have gotten the message that she was not permitted to hurt me with this story and stopped. Somehow a reason to stop would have magically appeared. But, thanks to TFT we continued to the end.

The pay off in this story came the next week. When I asked, "what stuck with you from the previous session?" She replied "that in all my life it was the first time any one had ever cried about what happened to me as a child." This meant a great deal to her and to me. Our relationship has continued to grow. She now trusts that it is safe for her to share her experiences. This is a first for her in several ways. This is the first time she has been safe enough in a relationship with another person, a man, and/or an authority figure to reveal her story. She knows she does not have to take care of me and that I will be there to help her.

The knowledge that we can engage safely clients as they come to us with all their stories of horror, violence, pain, and suffering has been a benefit of learning TFT. We can bring relief of the overwhelming emotions of both our clients and ourselves quickly. After the intrusive images and other symptoms have been eliminated often individuals needs to work through what has happen to them and their part in the events. Sometimes, in order to come to an understanding of what all these events mean in their life, they must tell the story to someone. Empathy is not a requirement for performing good TFT techniques but it is a big part of my work as a specialist in traumatic stress recovery. This means I am often exposed to vicarious traumatization and the associated upset that comes with witnessing their experiences through their stories.

The lesson for me is that I can be fearless as I engage with those who have suffered so greatly. Their stories of the horrors of life will not harm me. With TFT I can offer help and hope no matter the condition of my clients. In the moment as we work, or later as the memories surface I can treat myself. I can help my clients and learn in that helping relationship more about this field, human responses, and myself. Traumatic stress recovery work has been my calling and I am ever so grateful to Dr. Callahan and all those colleagues and clients who have made TFT a way for me to be fearless in this part of my life