

EFT and Alzheimer's — An Experience



Judith Kellner

This vignette you are about to read reveals the power of EFT in an unexpected context which I stumbled upon when talking with my ninety-one-year-old mother-in-law who has very advanced Alzheimer's disease.

Rose has lived with this devastating illness for about five years. She is incapable of taking care of herself or engaging in any activity on her own. Yet Rose is comfortable. The part of the brain that registers pain has been destroyed by Alzheimer's, relieving her from

the discomfort from osteoporosis-related symptoms she had lived with prior to the disease. She lives in a sophisticated assisted-living facility, a place she loved in the years prior to the disease. She is being taken care of by a wonderful Nepalese woman who accepts Rose's condition with care and compassion.

We try to make the trip from New York where we live to Tel-Aviv a couple of times a year to visit her in spite of the fact that she does not recognize anyone, does not know where she is and cannot put two words together coherently. The only thing I was able to do with her in past visits was to sing childhood songs to her, as she remembers the music and some of the lyrics. Our visits with her in the past typically lasted about half an hour at most due to challenges staying present in the face of such a failure to connect.

However, this last visit was different. I detected a hint of pain in Rose's face when she looked at her son (my husband), and asked, "Who is this?" He responded,

"I am Sam, your son, and you are my mother." I quite naturally used my EFT skills as I validated the glimpse of pain that I saw, saying, "Yes, it is confusing!" Rose looked at me and said, "Yes." From there gradually other words that fit just as well came up: Hard, painful, annoying, angry, frustrating and lonely. I sat next to her and Sam sat across from her. It was as if I became her emotional voice while she gazed at her son as though seeking something. This lasted for an hour and a half during which she was more present than ever since the onset of Alzheimer's.

Rose was actually able to convey to us that she feels some pressure to pretend she recognizes people's names and their relationship to her. "If you are told you have a child or husband and you do not recognize them, yet you should, it is hard," she said, pointing to her heart. "Yes, it is sad and maybe embarrassing," I said. She nodded her head, turning to me. "Is it even possible that I am a mother?" I asked her age. She said she did not know, "I am told so many things, that I am a wife, I am a mother, and I do not even know. I do not even know it is possible." I said, "Yes, it is so sad when you do not know." She cried. Sam and her caretakers jumped in, trying to take the tears away. I reassured them that it was okay and stayed with her tears. "Yes, it is sad not knowing 'who is who' (repeating her language), and to be confused and embarrassed. Rose, you have so much in your heart to deal with." She nodded her head in agreement, tears coming down.

Rose said, "Yes, I just want to be alone, not to feel this (pointing to her heart)... sad and embarrassing." (I helped her with the words.) When I continued to validate her feelings, Rose said that the only thing she could do in those moments of sadness and confusion was to fold the tissues. She typically had a pile of folded tissues next to her. Now we know that when she folds tissues she is feeling shame, trying to reclaim some sense of mastery.

She shared how hard it is to be confused and to have to pretend. And we could hear the frustration and anger in her shaky voice. "I think this is this, and I am told all the time that this is not this, this is not who it is, so I just want to be alone." But she cannot bear to

be alone. She says that she wants to go home where she knows who is who but she does not know where home is. And then she pleaded with her son, Sam, to take her home "with his legs." She asked me with pleading eyes to tell her what happened to her head, pointing to her forehead, why it is so confused and empty! Sadly, I had no answer, no response. I was "empty" for words.

An hour and a half into this, Rose looked lighter, more at ease. She held her son's hand lovingly. There was something more than the usual vacant expression in her eyes. We do not know if she thought that it was her husband or her other son holding her hand but she seemed more engaged. When Sam said that we were leaving, she held him tightly and said, "But then I will be alone again." Apparently, through this emotional process she felt somehow more connected, perhaps more understood and therefore less alone.

Does this insight into Rose's emotional existence tell us that emotions are the last part of the brain to go and that even when our "self" is gone, we know we don't want to be alone?

Rose gave us a glimpse into the felt experience of a patient with this disease. As a result we were able to be more attuned when we tried to engage with her. She taught us not to correct her when she was lost and confused but rather to stay with her, tracking her experience as a means of engaging with her emotionally.

Sue Johnson and the EFT model teach us to follow emotion, to trust that validating secondary emotion will lead us to primary emotion and a connection with our deepest attachment longings. Before this touching experience with Rose, I didn't know that this would apply and be so true with severe Alzheimer's patients as well. Now I know that the EFT model has much to offer to families of such patients and I hope for more research in this area.

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