

A Script for Developing, Practicing, and Using Attachment Figure Resources in EMDR Therapy

An open approach by Thomas Zimmerman, <http://EmdrTom.com>
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There are many, many, ways to develop and use attachment figure resources in EMDR Therapy. **This is just one approach.** This version guides the client to install nurturing, protective, attunement, and guidance qualities into the attachment figure resource.

Why Some Clients May Need Attachment Figure Resources

EMDR Therapy requires that enough adaptive information be present for clients to process old stuck information/trauma. Metaphorically, we cannot land a fish (memory) bigger than our boat (adaptive information). When it comes to adaptive information, clients with complex trauma and attachment wounding typically have small boats. Many clients with attachment wounding have profound deficits in the right-now selves that can make reprocessing difficult. Some of these deficits are: judgement or hostility toward the self as a child, difficulties with self-comfort and regulation, pervasive guilt/shame/blame/responsibility for both traumatic events and traumatic neglects, and pervasive internalization of the negative messages from others throughout their lives.

*Script: **When we struggle to get our needs met when we were young, that can make it harder for parts of ourselves to extend kindness or compassion to other parts of ourselves. This connecting of parts is a key element in healing.***

Why Develop an Attachment Figure Resource?

A well-developed and practiced attachment figure resource can:

- Be a powerful resource to help clients regulate between sessions.
- Allow lonely or stuck parts of the client to receive comfort without the client's adult parts having to explicitly provide it (since the adult parts may may not be healthy enough or hold too much judgement to do so).
- Allow the most adult parts to witness (as a rehearsal) the child parts getting comfort and support.
- Address the existential loneliness that defined much of childhood and may shut-down reprocessing.
- Promote easier connection and communication between the current adult selves and child states.
- Let difficult reprocessing sessions end safely (using the fish/boat metaphor above, if we hook an attachment whale that is too big for the boat we have today, the attachment figure is a powerful set of scissors that can allow us to safely and predictably disconnect from it for now).
- Dramatically minimize the risk of decompensation when working on attachment wounds in reprocessing.

*Script: **We do not develop these imaginary attachment figures to deny any difficult realities of childhood. We develop them so that we can take this healing journey more safely and so that we can***

consistently end sessions with as little residual distress as possible. Sometimes we may encounter a memory that is larger than we have the resources or time to manage in a session and a well-developed and practiced attachment figure resource can help settle the big emotions and realities of the childhood memory, letting us to continue more easily as adults in the adult world when the session has to end.

Assessing for the Need to Use Attachment Figure Resources

Ask the client as part of Phase One in EMDR Therapy: *“When you were young, who was consistently there for you when you needed help or were upset?”*

Or, “When you were young and you were upset, who could reliably and consistently help you feel better about yourself?”

If the client was not able to identify multiple sources of strong and consistent attachment, consider developing an attachment figure resource. Note that consistency and accessibility of these people were also important. If the client had a close relationship with a grandmother, but she lived far away, the attachment figure may not have been available *enough* to address the developmental needs of the client as a child. When there are deficits in childhood attachment, we can generally assume that there may be difficulties with the most adult client parts being able to solidly connect with child parts (which may be an essential pathway in client healing).

Developing the Relational Slot (Figure’s Relationship to You)

In this approach, the attachment figure is not an actual person. It is imaginary. We can borrow heavily from an actual person and add those qualities to the imaginary figure. Real people are complicated and we want to keep the complications out. We start by working with the client to define a relational *slot* (as in, what is this imaginary attachment figure’s relationship to you?). This can be a mother-in-the-neighborhood figure, an aunt-like figure, an uncle-like figure, a grandmother-like or grandfather-like figure, a teacher-like figure, or any other slot that might have been nice when were young.

Suggestions when selecting the relational slot for the attachment figure:

- It needs to be accessible (we need to be able to imagine it in the neighborhood).
- It needs to live outside of childhood home (otherwise, it may come in direct conflict with abusers, which may only invite complications). However, it needs to have enough moral authority so that it can come get you or you can safely go there whenever you like or need to.
- Avoid selecting a relational slot that is the same as an abuser. For example: the idea of an uncle-like figure may be too polluted if the client’s uncle was an abuser (simply the word “uncle” can be a trauma trigger. It is often okay for the attachment resource to be a mom-in-the-neighborhood, even if the client’s mother was abusive.
- If the client wants to use a sibling-like figure as the attachment figure, try to nudge away from that because this is not developmentally appropriate (because the person who we will be imagining giving you comfort and safety is still a child). If the client insists on using a sibling-like figure, try to make the figure as close to the adult years as possible.
- You can borrow from movies, media, anime, etc. Attachment figures can be cross-gender and even cross-species, but really needs to be something that the client as a child would have found

nurturing and comforting. Some people want to use Jesus as an attachment resource, but consider if Jesus would have been accessible to the client at six, seven, or eight years old (or may simply be another adult who should be able to provide comfort but isn't present, human, or emotionally accessible enough to).

Script: ***When you were young, who would have been nice to have in the neighborhood... would have been nice to visit. This can be a grandmother or grandfather-like figure, an aunt or uncle-like figure, a teacher-like figure, or just a mom or a dad-like figure who lives near you and is available to you. This person is imaginary, but can borrow qualities from people who you have had at various times in your life who treated you like you were important.***

Adding Qualities to the Attachment Figure

Once the relational slot is selected, there are two main pathways we can use to add qualities to the attachment figure: we can borrow qualities from people/experiences that we have had or we imagine those qualities. Most well-developed attachment figures borrow some from family members, friends, teachers, or mentors (who were kind and supportive) and are supplemented by imagining some of the remaining qualities. Clients with extensive trauma may not have much adaptive that we can borrow from memory. In these cases, we are left with imagination, media, movies, etc. When borrowing from actual people, we can modify the questions in the script to: ***“How did this person show that they cared about you?”*** Slow tap those qualities in. Once we have those qualities installed, use the guide below to imagine the qualities that may be missing. For each of these categories below, there may be multiple aspects or qualities that we can tap in or “soak into” this attachment figure.

Physical Features and Inviting a Quick Hug

Once we have decided on the relational slot, we ask clients to imagine and notice the physicality of a hug. This can be done before we add any emotional or needed qualities, so if there is a problem with the hug it's easier to figure out than if we do this later. We do not specify whether the *you* that is receiving the hug is the adult selves or the child selves (since introducing child selves at this stage can be triggering... let the client take it where they take it).

Script: ***Is this person you are imagining tall or short, thin or heavy? I'm asking because I'm about to ask you to imagine a quick hug from someone this size and shape. Before we put any emotional qualities into this figure, can you imagine what it would be like to receive a quick hug from someone like this? Just imagine it for a few seconds...***

Good. How was that?

[If the client reports a positive or neutral response, you can invite them into about 10 seconds of slow bilateral and notice or ***soak up*** that response. If the response was not positive or neutral, normalize that and try to troubleshoot the problem.]

Food

Other than people with histories of disordered eating, starting with food is a very good and relatively safe place to start.

Script: ***Is there anything this person would have cooked for you, or had in the house for you?***

Notice that you are in their kitchen while they are cooking x for you.

Good. How was that?

[If the client reports a positive or neutral response, you can invite them into about 10 seconds of slow bilateral and notice or **soak up** that response. If the response was not positive or neutral, normalize that and try to troubleshoot the problem.]

Play

Play is a central task of childhood. For many people, play was a lonely or complicated activity in childhood and the opportunity to bring connection and nurture into play can be helpful.

Script: **How would this figure play with you? What would they play with you? Can you notice that?**

Good. How was that?

[If the client reports a positive or neutral response, you can invite them into about 10 seconds of slow bilateral and notice or **soak up** that response. If the response was not positive or neutral, normalize that and try to troubleshoot the problem.]

Attunement/Importance/Nurture

Script Option 1: **If this person hasn't seen you for a while and you went to their house, how would they greet you?** If positive, invite slow bilateral: **Can you notice that?**

Script Option 2: **How would this person show you that you were important?** If positive, invite slow bilateral: **Can you notice that?**

Good. How was that? If anything difficult comes up in this step, it is often grief related to what didn't happen. Normalize that. It makes sense that imagining something we did not get may cause us to have an emotional response.

Presence

Simply being in the presence of someone who can "safely" provide nurture, attunement, protection, and information can be calming and help meet developmental needs.

Script: **Can you notice what it feels like simply to be in the presence of this person... imaging just sitting in a living room and visiting, or watching television?** If positive, invite slow bilateral: **Can you notice that?**

Good. How was that? If anything difficult comes up in this step, it is often grief related to what didn't happen. Normalize that. It makes sense that imagining something we did not get may cause us to have an emotional response.

Safety/Protection

Try to avoid direct triggering the trauma that may have happened from parents or the childhood home. It may be a gentler approach to imagine the attachment figure providing some safety and protection using children in the neighborhood.

What would this person do if a kid in the neighborhood was being mean to you or said something unkind? If positive, invite slow bilateral: ***Can you notice that?***

Good. How was that? If anything difficult comes up in this step, it is often grief related to the protection that didn't happen that should have. Normalize that as grief when appropriate. It makes sense that imagining something we did not get may cause us to have an emotional response.

Guidance

It is difficult to trust that people who do not know how to nurture us are able to provide accurate guidance about how to navigate the world. One of the key things attachment figures provide are suggestions for how to manage difficulties in the world.

Script: ***If you were encountering difficulties at school or with friends, how would this person be able to help you figure out these problems?*** If positive, invite slow bilateral: ***Can you notice that?***

Good. How was that? If anything difficult comes up in this step, it is often grief related to the guidance that didn't happen that should have. Normalize that as grief when appropriate. It makes sense that imagining something we did not get may cause us to have an emotional response.

Other Things

Script: ***Is there anything else that this person needs to have that may have been helpful to us when we were young?***

If positive, invite slow bilateral: ***Can you notice that?***

Good. How was that? If anything difficult comes up in this step, it is often grief related to the things that didn't happen that should have. Normalize that as grief when appropriate. It makes sense that imagining something we did not get may cause us to have an emotional response.

Name

Script: ***How would you like to refer to this attachment figure? Would you like to give it a name?*** If positive, invite slow bilateral: ***Can you notice that?***

Homework

A well-developed attachment figure is also a well-practiced attachment figure. We do not want the first time the client relies on the attachment figure to be inside a difficult EMDR Therapy reprocessing session. We want to invite the client to use the attachment figure resource often between sessions.

Script: ***Now that you have this attachment figure, please use [him/her/them] between sessions when you need comfort or information. Bringing this attachment figure in between sessions is an important part of using it successfully when we need to in sessions.***

Common Problems or Possible Complications

People with pervasive trauma may have pervasive deficits in attachment and may have very little adaptive that we can borrow. This is okay, but introduces some potential complications. We can also borrow from movies, books, superheroes, comics, or characters from television series. We borrow from wherever we can.

One of the most common problems is the sudden emergence of grief related to childhood needs that were not met. Grief makes sense. Normalize it. If the grief process is too strong to continue, even after normalizing it, we can split the development of the attachment figure into multiple sessions.

Additional Resources

Much of the early and important work and training at the intersection of EMDR Therapy and attachment resources was done by Laurel Parnell (who continues to train). This script is heavily informed by Parnell's work. More recently, other approaches to working with parts can accomplish many of the same goals and can address similar deficits.

- Parnell, L. (2013). Attachment-focused EMDR: Healing Relational Trauma. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- <https://emdrpodcast.com/2021/04/26/developing-and-using-attachment-figures-in-attachment-wounding/>

About Thomas Zimmerman

Thomas is a highly trained and experienced trauma therapist who has worked with hundreds of severely traumatized clients and is familiar with the wide range of ways that trauma may express. He specializes in attachment wounding and working through problems with resourcing with severely complex trauma. Much of his work is organized around the central "Dip Your Toe In" approach in all phase of working with complex trauma.

Thomas has attended graduate programs at Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green State University, and Youngstown State University.

Thomas was trained in EMDR Therapy by the Institute for Creative Mindfulness and provides consultation to EMDR therapists across the country. He has received advanced trainings and provides consultation in the following topics: dissociation, working with ego states, working with clients at the intersection of trauma and severe and persistent mental illness, working effectively with attachment wounding, and working with high-risk clients.

Thomas maintains the popular EMDR therapy blog for therapists: <http://GoWithThat.wordpress.com> and administers the largest global group of EMDR therapists on Facebook at: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/EMDRResources>. Thomas also produces a podcast for EMDR therapists that focuses on solutions to the difficulties of working with complex trauma using EMDR therapy: <http://EmdrPodcast.com>. Lately, he has been exploring Flash-like strategies to treat complex trauma sooner: <http://FourBlinks.com>.

Thomas is the owner of the practice EMDR Cleveland and lives in Cleveland with his girlfriend, Sophia (service dog), and his 14-year old nephew.