

Greenberg has taken us back in time with him to understand—and experience—his incorporation of emotion-focused therapy into the mainstream of therapy interventions, arguably one of the most important contributions made to the field of psychotherapy in the 20th century. He also shares the details of his groundbreaking development of an innovative process research methodology that has had important implications for clinical practice. An educational and fascinating read.

—**Marvin R. Goldfried, PhD**, Distinguished Professor of Psychology (Retired), Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, NY, United States

It is rare to find an academic book that persuasively connects the author's autobiography to the theory and therapy he developed so brilliantly. I was intrigued to learn how core elements of the humanistic philosophy, affect theory, and clinical wisdom that are present in emotion-focused therapy emerged from Les Greenberg's lifelong search for authenticity and meaning, as shaped by the familial and cultural milieu of his South African upbringing. What a gripping and effective way to learn the conceptual underpinnings and clinical practice of this process-experiential, evidence-based therapy!

—**Stanley B. Messer, PhD**, Distinguished Professor Emeritus and Former Dean, Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology, Rutgers University, Piscataway, NJ, United States

Les Greenberg has not only investigated, practiced, taught, and built the theory of emotion-focused therapy (EFT), he has been living it. This memoir, full of revealing self-explorations, touching recollections and insightful reflections, may be the best resource to understand and learn EFT, as it gives us a profoundly human window of how EFT can be embodied, and how it can facilitate our own personal and professional actualization.

—**Louis G. Castonguay, PhD**, Liberal Arts Professor of Psychology, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, United States, and Former President of the Society for Psychotherapy Research

Greenberg's well-written, compelling description of his rich inner life is fascinating and provides a window into his personality and the development of emotion-focused therapy. I recommend this book as a model for the rest of us to reflect on how our experiences influence our implicit and explicit theories.

—**Clara E. Hill, PhD**, Department of Psychology, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, United States

A compelling intellectual and emotional journey leading to the development of emotion-focused therapy, by one of the pioneers of psychotherapy and its research. An eye-opener and an embarrassment of riches for anyone interested in EFT.

—**Erkki Heinonen, PhD**, Professor of Psychology, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
1. Introduction: Toward Becoming Emotion Focused	3
2. Emotion-Focused Therapy: Emotional Functioning and Therapeutic Practice	13
3. My Life	43
4. Presuppositions	81
5. Empathy: My First Love	99
6. My Love Affair With Emotion	137
7. My Process: From Empathy to Focusing to Awareness to Emotional Arousal	175
8. Marriage: The Crucible of My Vulnerability	217
9. Human Functioning: The Origins of Emotion-Focused Therapy Theory	253
10. Development of a Dialectical Constructivist Theory	287
11. On Emotional Knowing: Tacit Versus Explicit Knowledge and Emotional Functioning	321
12. On Method: The Context of Discovery	341
Conclusion	381
<i>References</i>	393
<i>Index</i>	417
<i>About the Author</i>	433

1

INTRODUCTION

Toward Becoming Emotion Focused

Read no history: nothing but biography, for that is life without theory.

—Benjamin Disraeli

Talent is like electricity. We don't understand electricity. We use it.

—Maya Angelou

In this book, I delve into the core aspects of how I became an emotion-focused psychotherapist. I track the development of my thinking and the practice of emotion-focused therapy (EFT) as I see it now with hindsight. Again, this book is not a comprehensive tracking of the development of EFT as an approach. I am also not claiming that I did it all alone, as there were many others who contributed to its development. Rather, my primary objective in writing this book is to explore the origins of how my thinking and practice of EFT developed. Throughout the book, I also examine the interplay between implicit and explicit learning in my development. By examining my personal experiences and some aspects of the wider context of the development of EFT, I aim to provide fellow psychotherapists with valuable insights into emotion work and a deeper understanding of the power and significance of working with emotions in the therapeutic process.

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On Becoming Emotion Focused, by L. S. Greenberg

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In the ensuing chapters, I trace my process of synthesizing and critiquing different theoretical views of emotion and the role of emotion in therapy to reach a new understanding of how to work with emotion in therapy. I also describe the interweaving of the many different theoretical and practical threads that contribute to making up an emotion-focused perspective. To truly comprehend a theory of psychotherapy, one must delve into the mind of the theorist. In this book, I therefore embark on an introspective journey to unravel the roots of how I arrived at the therapeutic importance of focusing on emotion in an empathic manner.

FOCUSING ON EMOTION IN AN EMPATHIC MANNER

Trainees often have inquired about the origin of my attunement to affect, questioning whether it was an inherent trait or a learned skill. Their curiosity served as a catalyst for my attempt to explore the complex evolution of this therapeutic skill. Of course, many therapists possess this skill, but the question of whether my empathic capacities were innate or cultivated were especially intriguing to people because of my background of moving from engineering to psychotherapy. I have often been asked, “Did you possess these qualities as a natural talent before you switched from engineering to psychology, or did they develop through training?” This question was asked more frequently by trainees from Asian cultural backgrounds, where emotional expression and emotion naming were less common and probably not traditionally encouraged in child-rearing and general society. Many others who came from cultures, families, or societies that similarly were not emotion friendly were also puzzled about how one could read another person’s feelings. It became clear that emotions and empathy were somewhat of a mystery to many people with these upbringings. This only stands to show that much of this ability must be learned through one’s upbringing and environment. Thus, some people have an advantage when they enter EFT training, which comes from having had an upbringing that provided an informal educational foundation for acquiring emotion-focused and empathic abilities.

The question of whether emotion-focused skills could be acquired through learning often intrigued those in training. I posit that EFT skills can be learned, though they may also be inborn and come to fruition through training. I also discuss how people can best learn to become emotion focused regardless of any inborn talent and trace how I developed emotion-focused abilities. Unraveling the intricacies of my development and how EFT is learned is a complex endeavor. However, describing my journey will hopefully illuminate how to learn the approach and shed some light on what was nature and what was

nurture in my development. I also discuss what seems to lead other therapists to become emotion focused rather than adopt some other approach, and this, too, will reveal something about what is involved in becoming emotion focused.

TALENT OR SKILL

The nature versus nurture quandary of whether these skills of emotion awareness and empathic attunement to affect were inborn or learned, while initially alluring, belies the complexity of human development. Rather than a stark either-or divide, the interplay of nature and nurture weaves a complex story.¹ The query, however, persists: What, if anything, within me or within my early surroundings charted my course toward an emotion-focused path? When I considered whether this emotional ability represented an inborn talent or a learned craft, it became clear that it appeared virtually impossible to answer. I decided then to reframe the question as the following: What aspect of my view and skill came from implicit learning, learning from experience, and what came from explicit learning, or what one might think of as book learning? This was a more tractable question.

Talent is defined as a natural aptitude, often manifesting without explicit instruction. It signifies an innate ability flowering in a specific realm, combined with exceptional performance. The first difficulty in answering the nature versus nurture question with reference to emotion-focused talent is that the demarcation between innate ability and learned proficiency is an impossible riddle. The second difficulty is that innate aspects can pertain to an inborn ability to learn within a specific domain, rather than an innate ability itself. Thus, is an emotion-focused ability a specific emotion-focused talent or is it an inborn sensitivity to the environment that inclines one to absorb what is transmitted? A sensitivity of the latter type could lead one to develop either an emotion-focused or emotion-avoidant attitude or talent depending on how emotions were treated in one's upbringing. This raises the possibility that, rather than whatever natural talent one may have for empathy and emotional perceptiveness, that talent could come from an innate sensitivity to interpersonal engagement for better

¹Epigenetics illuminates how, right from the get-go, behaviors and environments can trigger gene-level changes, altering our genetic functioning before we are even born. As a nascent brain unfurls, it tunes itself to its surroundings, acquiring the nuances critical for survival and shaping a niche within the spectrum of livable conditions. Our cultural environment thus subtly molds our neural circuits, embedding the wisdom essential to navigate and flourish within our specific context. Amidst this intricate dance between nature and nurture, pinpointing innate versus acquired aspects becomes an elusive endeavor, rendering the essence of who I am, and who all of us are, as an exquisite fusion of both.

or for worse. This sensitivity, if nurtured in an emotionally responsive environment, could blossom into an ability to perceive and respond to emotions, but it could equally falter in an adverse environment. An emotion-unfriendly environment could lead the sensitive person to withdraw and shut down in response to other negative emotion learnings, all because the person was innately primed to learn from their emotion. Therefore, it may not have been that I was born with the talent of empathy to emotion but rather that I was born with a sensitivity to learn from interpersonal emotional cues and that this led to me learning to be perceptive and adaptively responsive to emotion because my environment was facilitative of this. But if I had grown up in an adverse emotion environment, I could just as well have become emotionally incompetent.

So, instead of tackling the nature versus nurture and talent or learned skill arguments, I reframe this question and try to identify how much of my proficiency in emotion-focused skills can be attributed to explicit theoretical teachings that offered me new concepts, and how much stems from implicit learning from experience that molded a distinctive way of being. On the implicit side (nature), I believe that my theoretical approach and practical skills developed naturally, as a result of life experiences, making them appear more inborn. It is possible that my inborn talent was to be sensitive to emotional cues and that I grew in an environment that allowed this ability to blossom into a skill. On the side of what was explicitly learned (nurture), I attempt to identify which concepts and principles of the theory and practice stemmed from my acquisition of identifiable sources of theoretical and scientific knowledge.

COGNITION VERSUS EMOTION

Throughout this book, I illustrate the integral role of experiential knowing in being emotion focused, and I discuss the ongoing tensions between cognition and emotion. Cognitive behavior therapy emerged in the 1970s, promoting empirical testing of an approach that was based on the therapeutic benefits of rational analysis of experience and the provision of coping skills. The belief that cognition determined emotion became the norm in the field of psychotherapy starting in the 1980s. EFT developed as a counterpoint to this trend, departing from the norm by prioritizing experientially based knowledge over conceptual reasoning. EFT emphasized the central role of affect, emotion, and feeling in human functioning by seeing emotion as potentially adaptive rather than irrational. EFT also put forth the notion of transformation of emotion by synthesis (changing emotion with emotion) as an alternative to error correction or insight. While rational and analytic thought still plays a supportive role

in EFT, the essence of EFT lies in its view of the deepening and sequencing of emotion as something that is change producing.

I also explore each of the factors that led to the profound intellectual shift that brought me to the realization that emotion holds primacy over cognition. Rather than adhering to the beliefs of Epictetus and other Stoics, which assert that we are disturbed not by things but by our interpretations of them, I came to believe that emotion influences perception more than cognition influences emotion, especially in the more significant areas of life. I saw emotion as the fundamental datum of existence—one that significantly influences thought and decision making. Extensive research, including the works of LeDoux (1986) and McGilchrist (2009), now supports my initially intuitive perspective by positing that emotion is the master and cognition assumes a subordinate role as its servant.

There is no doubt in my mind that ultimately, at a neuronal and experiential level, emotion and cognition are inseparable. One needs to keep in mind that while it may be useful to have concepts like emotion and cognition to help analyze human functioning, it is one thing to use these terms to make conceptual distinctions, but quite another to reify them as separate existing entities that are exclusive. To claim that cognition is emotion free, and that emotion is cognition free and each is a separate psychological faculty is a fallacy. It is, however, useful, especially in psychotherapy, to use concepts like thoughts and feelings as separate processes but to claim that emotion is free of cognition is to lose sight of the difference between concept and experience. Conceptually, thinking and feeling are different, and by using these words we identify separate aspects of experience, but this does not mean they are totally separate and experienced independently. Emotion always includes attention and evaluation, and thoughts are filled with attitude, feelings and motivations. People are always caring about what goes on in them and in the world. They give a damn about this or that and the brain is always evaluating situations in relation to one's well-being. Cognition and emotion thus are ultimately inseparable. Cognition is inherently affective, and affect is cognitively laden. Throughout this book, however, I will be using the concepts of reason and emotion, cognition and affect, and thought and feeling to capture different aspects of experience without assuming these are truly separable, distinct processes.

UNDERSTANDING THE THERAPY THEORIST

Studies consistently reveal that therapists account for a substantial portion of the variance in therapeutic outcomes (Castonguay & Hill, 2017). The effort in

this book to identify what led me down an emotion-focused path and determined how I developed my skill aligns with my interest in identifying therapist factors that contribute to positive therapeutic outcomes. I look at how much my ability was influenced by life experiences and to what extent formal education contributed. This is the fundamental question that lays the groundwork for this book.

Through these chapters unwinds a narrative that traces the evolution of my development of EFT and charts its transition from a nascent theory to an established therapeutic approach. As I have said, one needs delve into the mind of the theorist to understand the theory. I thus look at how my perception of emotion's precedence over cognition evolved as an outlook that diverged markedly from the cognitive therapy zeitgeist that had developed over the course of my career. The chapters in this book document my journey from prioritizing meaning to viewing emotion as our primary meaning system. I examine the factors that facilitated this paradigm shift from reason to emotion to show how I moved from Descartes's famous proposition "I think, therefore I am" to explicating an opposing declaration that "I feel, therefore I am." I also describe the intricate interplay between emotion and cognition that defines EFT.

EMOTION-FOCUSED THERAPY AS A VIBRANT TAPESTRY

Throughout this book, I show how the construction of EFT mirrors the weaving of a vibrant tapestry, entwining threads of various colors to create a multicolored artistic product. It helps to think of EFT as a colorful fabric made up of personal, social, intellectual, and academic threads that encompass topics such as existential choice, empathy, emotion, dialectical functioning, coupling, process, epistemology, and method. All these threads, covering theory and practice, emerged from a combination of my life experience and explicit teachings and were woven together to form the colorful tapestry that is EFT.

Each of the chapters in this book discuss one of the threads that have shaped me and led to the weaving together of this tapestry. Each chapter presents a distinct concept as a thread of the tapestry and shows how each conceptual thread provides a unique contribution to the evolution of EFT theory and therapeutic practice. Some threads themselves involve the winding together of a few different strands. The threads provide the foundational architecture of this approach, and their interlacing is the very essence that renders EFT distinct. By navigating these threads, I endeavor to present a panoramic view of what is entailed by becoming emotion focused.

FOCUSING ON THE THREADS: A ROAD MAP OF THE CHAPTERS

In most chapters, I integrate the literature that influenced me and helped explicate my implicit knowledge. I also provide a view of my personal life and its impact on my implicit sense of the different threads that make up EFT. In addition, I explain what I kept or discarded from each influence, examine why I rejected certain approaches, and discuss those I carried with me to build what would ultimately become EFT.

This current chapter offers an introduction and explanation of the purpose of the book to illustrate the factors that led to me becoming emotion focused and develop the theory of EFT. Chapter 2 presents EFT's current view of emotion and therapy. It lays out a general perspective on the functioning of emotion that serves as a bedrock for the approach and discusses fundamental principles of practice. Subsequent chapters look at how I developed these views. Those who want to jump straight to the more biographical part and skip the introductory theory chapter might want to go directly to Chapter 3 on my life and return later to the more theoretical chapters.

Chapter 3 discusses my childhood and family environment as well as their impacts on me. I explore how my experience of emotion and its management throughout my childhood likely set a foundation for my later understanding of emotion processes.

In Chapter 4 on presuppositions, I discuss how existential responsibility emerged as an important concept from my life experience up until that point. As a young adult and engineer searching for purpose, I began to explicate a set of beliefs that would become the foundation of EFT's views of human functioning. Reading existential writers led me to value authenticity, and I espoused the importance of facing the world and myself as I truly was rather than living in the world of appearance and image. These ideas laid down a template for living for myself and for what later became a therapy in which grappling with issues of choice, responsibility, isolation, and meaninglessness were things that all people needed to face.

Chapter 5 presents my acquisition and development of empathy as the first major thread of the weave. I describe my adolescent experience of empathy with friends. I also talk about the significance in my life of finding my mentor, Laura Rice, and being introduced by her, in explicit terms, to the power of empathy.

Chapter 6 focuses on how I arrived theoretically at the primacy of emotion and how my personal experience of emotion eventually convinced me that one cannot live by rationality alone. In this chapter, I examine my personal struggle with the inherent tensions between emotion and reason. Additionally, I explore the

factors prevalent in the backgrounds of both myself and other emotion-focused therapists that ultimately led us to embrace an emotion-focused perspective. I also tackle the question of whether an emotion-focused approach is trainable and something that can be cultivated.

Chapter 7 reviews the main humanistic practices for working with emotion and how they influenced me. I describe how through the last four decades, I searched for a coherent theory of practice that would explain therapeutic work with emotion. Here, I present my final synthesis of all these approaches into the development of a new approach.

In Chapter 8, I talk about the role of my marriage in developing both individual and couples EFT. I describe how when I was able to reveal my vulnerable emotions to my wife, rather than blame her, we grew closer, trusted each other more, and formed a stronger emotional bond. I also discuss that it was my being afraid of not being in control or of losing face that made it difficult for me to be vulnerable. In this chapter, I also describe my path into systemic therapy, my initial influences in this direction, and how my sabbatical in Palo Alto at the Mental Research Institute in systemic therapy added a totally novel view of how to work with interaction in couples and family therapy.

Chapter 9 covers the original client-centered and gestalt theories and their views of an actualizing tendency as the major motivation and the impact of this view on me. I discuss my concerns about any implied homeostatic view of functioning and contrast this with a homeodynamic view of a growth tendency. I also discuss how the notion of a narrative identity emerged as superior to notions of beliefs and self-concepts as governing constructs to explain the creation of identity. In addition, I describe the impact of my involvement with the Society of Psychotherapy Research and Society for the Exploration of Psychotherapy Integration, as well as my involvement in the constructivist psychotherapy movement.

Chapter 10 looks at the development of the dialectical constructivist theory of self functioning. In this chapter, I discuss emotion schemes and their role in the dialectical constructivist model. I reflect on my mental process of developing a model, going from implicit and intuitive sense, to an explicit articulation in a model. I also emphasize that a model is just that, a model, and does not claim to be true—only useful.

Chapter 11 moves to discussing how, influenced by Michael Polanyi's (1966) view of tacit knowing, I entered psychology determined to find out how it was that we knew more than we could say. Polanyi's ideas became a clarion call for action throughout my career and drove me to psychology to try and understand intuition and gut feelings. I also discuss how the cognitive revolution in psychology influenced me to see the importance of attention in the construction of

experience and meaning and to see attentional allocation as a central processing activity that determines people's awareness of themselves.

Chapter 12 tackles the issue of my views of the scientific method and the importance of discovery rather than proof at this stage of development in psychotherapy research. I discuss the development of task analysis, which led to the creation of central aspects of EFT, which are markers and tasks, and models of the process of change, as an alternative to hypothesis testing and experimental design. I again appeal to Polyani, who claimed that science is based a lot on the scientist's personal knowledge and argued that discovery is filled with strong personal feelings and commitments.

And lastly, Chapter 13 focuses on the question that inspired this book—is becoming emotion focused dependent on innate talent and implicit learning based on experience, or is it an acquired skill that can be taught and explicitly learned in the classroom? After reflecting on this question, I conclude by providing tips to therapist on how to become more emotion focused.