

WCX July 2012
FIRE & ICE: WORKING WITH EMOTION IN SESSION
Jennifer Villatte & Robyn Walser
Contact jlville@gmail.com for more information

GENERAL OUTLINE

9:00-9:20 Overview of Strategies
9:20-9:40 Demonstration: Fire
9:40- 10:00 Demonstration: Ice
10:00-10:30 Deliberate Practice & Informative Feedback

Aims for Today

- Orient to important issues in working with emotionally intense or withdrawn clients
- Learn a framework of strategies for working with fiery and icy emotional expression
- Practice analyzing therapy interactions, implementing strategies, and receive informative feedback
- Plan for continued deliberate practice with feedback

This workshop was designed for the intermediate-advanced clinician using learning principles intended to move you off the amateur plateau and toward expert performance. The questions in this handout will help you personalize an active learning experience and allow you to monitor your progress and areas for further practice. For more information on expert performance and deliberate practice, contact Jennifer at jlville@gmail.com.

Important things we will not cover today due to time constraints

- Identify your own reactions and obstacles to working with Fire & Ice clients
- Apply ACT processes to yourself as a therapist
- Build rapport and manage burnout with difficult clients
- Learn specific tools or techniques for working with Fire & Ice clients

Which of these would you like to work on?

Where can you learn more about these issues?

What opportunities do you have to practice and receive feedback on the issues?

What is a fire & ice client?

- Commonly called emotional excesses and deficits
 - Fire Descriptors: intense, explosive, impulsive, unpredictable, labile, Axis II, hot mess, histrionic, dramatic, aggressive,
 - Ice Descriptors- cold, unemotional, withdrawn, anhedonic, Cluster c, uncaring, numb, empty, alexithymic, cold fish, avoidant, in denial, avoidant
- More precise and compassionate conceptualization: the client's emotional experience or expression is more/less than what would be expected in the current context
- Of course, these fiery or icy responses often make perfect sense given the client's history, but since most people they interact with don't know or understand their histories, their behavior is often confusing and upsetting to others.
- Our Aim: Emotional expression that is effective (in terms of client's goals and values) in this moment

How do I conceptualize my client's difficulties with effective emotional expression? How does the way I think and speak about these clients influence my therapeutic interactions? My treatment plan?

Why are Fire & Ice clients difficult for therapists?

- Difficult to engage – can't get a word in, won't pick up the conversation thread, won't reciprocate self-disclosure or intimacy moves
- Lack of accurate feedback- hard to tell if you're having your intended impact- may feel like a pony doing tricks until you hit the mark
- Unpredictable responses- not sure your impact will match your intention, slightest thing might trigger a big reaction; comes out of the blue because you don't see the underlying emotional context
- Triggers are own stuff- insecurities around identity and values as therapist; strong (or no) emotion directed at therapist
- Emotion derails our agenda- feels like emotion distracts from treatment target (rather than emotion being the target)
- Liability worries- Will this person misinterpret my emotional expression? Will a focus on emotion increase their engagement in harmful behaviors? Will they fire me?

What reactions do you have when working with Fire & Ice clients?

What is hard for you about working with Fire clients? Ice clients?

How might you practice open, aware, engaged behavior in relation to these clients?

A FEW BROAD STRATEGIES FOR WORKING WITH FIRE AND ICE CLIENTS

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- **This is not an exhaustive list.** These are merely a few core strategies grounded in contextual behavioral principles for targeting ineffective emotional expression.
- **This is one way, not THE way.** There are plenty of other good, evidence-based frameworks for conceptualizing and treating Fire & Ice clients. Use what resonates for you and your clients.
- **This is not a treatment-specific list.** Feel free to bring in techniques from other evidence-based practices. We see these strategies as the glue that ties good interventions together.
- **Approach this like a buffet.** Scan the strategies for what looks interesting, useful, and different for you. Sample a few that look tasty. Take a bigger portion of only one or two you'd like to focus on now. You can always come back for more later.

1. Model effective emotional expression

- Apply ACT processes to yourself. Be aware of and open to your emotions, defuse from rules about how therapists should feel/act, and do what works with this client in this moment.
- Meet the client where they are at and model expression that is possible for them to replicate. Try not to be unrealistically (for the client at this stage) articulate or intense. This may mean modulating what comes naturally to you and gradually increasing/decreasing the frequency or intensity of your expression.
- Notice how your emotional expression impacts the client. If it is positive, you may be able to use this as a reinforcer. If it is negative, you've probably found a sticking point or barrier that is worth working on.

In what situations might this be useful? How might I practice this? How would I know if I improved?

2. Evoke emotional experience and effective expression

- Be ready when it comes up in session. It will. Use meta-communication to shift from content to process.
- Use your own emotion as a guide. Consider sharing your emotional responses with the client. It's a good opportunity to model effective expression and it often evokes emotion in the client.
- Ask client to write, talk, or imagine a recent emotional event. Use mindfulness and present tense language to be more evocative. Possible exercises: sweet spot, little kid.

- Use aids (photos, films, songs, stories, current events) if client has great difficulty identifying or working with personal content.

In what situations might this be useful? How might I practice this? How would I know if I improved?

3. Shape observing & describing emotions (tacting)

- Notice early signs of emotion in the client and help them observe, then describe. Defusion may help in moving from judgment to description.
- If emotion feels absent or overwhelming, start with bodily sensations. Physicalizing and eyes-closed mindfulness exercises can be useful here.
- If the client has difficulty finding words for emotions, encourage them to use metaphors. Then move toward describing emotions in a way that can be understood easily by others.
- Use perspective taking (if I were you I'd feel..., if you were me, what would you feel?)
- Shape accurate tacts- "it could be that you're sick, but it could also be an emotion you're feeling in the pit of your stomach. Could that be the case here? Any ideas what emotion that could be?"
- If client describes secondary emotions, validate and probe for primary emotions. "That does look like anger you're feeling and I can understand why you'd be annoyed in this situation. Are there any other emotions present? Maybe hiding underneath or beside the anger?"

In what situations might this be useful? How might I practice this? How would I know if I improved?

4. Link emotion to workability

- Help client identify and defuse from rules about how they should feel or express their emotions.
- Transform the function of emotions (from avoid/escape to approach) via workability questions
 - What useful information is this emotion giving me about this situation?
 - What is the best way to respond to that information right now?
 - What will I gain by expressing my emotions effectively now?
- Explicitly link appropriate emotional expression to client's values and orient to valued outcomes

In what situations might this be useful? How might I practice this? How would I know if I improved?

5. Shape effective modulation of emotional expression

- Note the difference between emotional experience (feeling) and expression.
- Let the experience be what it will be (big or small). Not necessary to intervene here, but acceptance and defusion might be helpful if the client needs coaching.
- Help the client modulate (titrate up or down) the expression (words, tone and volume of voice, eye contact, gestures, body language, movement, posture, overt behavioral responses). Reinforce successive approximations.
- Experience of emotion will typically be shaped by the expression (i.e., expressing more usually leads to feeling more, and vice versa). Research shows no deleterious effects of modulating expression (though there is evidence that direct attempts to modulate experience can be harmful.)

In what situations might this be useful? How might I practice this? How would I know if I improved?

6. Track consequences of emotional expression

- Help client assess the consequences of client's current emotional expression. Ask about impact on their mood, thoughts, behaviors, and relationships with others, relationship with themselves, and their goals. Discuss the impact on you, the therapist.
- Explore the intent- impact gap. Notice when responses are thoughtless or result in unintended negative effects. Help clients notice the moment of choice when they can respond to emotion with intention. This process is often painful (i.e., good opportunity to work with emotion in session).
- If the ineffective emotional response is maintained by:
 - negative reinforcement (e.g., escape from aversive experience, avoidance of responsibilities), then work on acceptance and self-as-context
 - positive reinforcement (e.g., caring, concern, instrumental support), then work on finding more effective ways to get the reward

- punishment (shame, rejection, criticism, withdrawal of support), then defuse from past punishers that are no longer present, increase access to reinforcers, increase tracking of valued consequences
- rules about how one should feel and express their emotions, then focus on defusion and workability

In what situations might this be useful? How might I practice this? How would I know if I improved?

Demonstration- Fire

What was effective in this demonstration?

What strategies did I see employed that I might try?

What questions do I have for the therapist? For the client?

Demonstration- Ice

What was effective in this demonstration?

What strategies did I see employed that I might try?

What questions do I have for the therapist? For the client?

Role Play instructions

Pair up. We will do one role play, so you will have to choose which of you will be the therapist . I suggest you **play the therapist if you are not confident about your clinical skills** with these clients, and you **play the client if you are having strong reactions or burnout** with your fire and ice clients.

Pick one of the following starting points to role play, or create one based on your own experience.

The therapist chooses one (no more than two) of these strategies to work on. Again, I suggest you **pick one that is more challenging for you**. This is practice, not performance. It's ok if it gets ugly.

Role play for ten minutes. **Try new things. Be bold.** How many opportunities do you have to get direct observation and coaching of your clinical work?

Suggested Role-play Starting Points

- The client speaks about an event that would typically elicit strong emotion (e.g., trauma, loss, conflict) with absolutely no sign of emotion.
- The client enters the session in a very agitated state. She complains that she is doing much worse, despite following your advice. She demands that you fix this problem immediately. She is yelling, standing up while you are sitting down, and making fists.
- When discussing a difficult event (trauma, loss, conflict) the client begins sobbing and shaking to the point that he cannot speak. He withdraws from the conversation and appears consumed by his emotion. Based on your functional analysis, you believe this response to his emotional experience occurs frequently and is interfering with his work, which he values.
- The client is telling you about her depression and hopelessness. She is barely listening to you and frequently interrupts with a fast and loud speech that involves rumination and worry. She is pacing, wringing her hands, and won't look at you.
- You notice some tears in the corner of your client's eyes when talking about his children. When you ask about it, the client says he must have an allergy and insists he doesn't feel anything right now. You know that he loves his kids and that his drug abuse led to his neglect of them.
- You ask the client what he is feeling and he says he feel nothing and is empty or dead inside. His posture is relaxed and he looks you in the eyes when speaking. He shows no signs of emotion.
- You have been working with a socially anxious client for 12 weeks. The client talks about emotions when you prompt him, but his affect and voice is flat. You often feel confused when talking with him. You also find it difficult to engage him in conversation or to feel connected to him.

Role-Play Feedback from the “Client” to the “Therapist”

Be specific about what the therapist did and what impact it had on you as a client.

One thing that worked well:

One thing that can be improved on:

Therapist’s self-feedback:

How to Continue Improving your Skill with Fire & Ice Clients

- Doing something again and again does not improve performance. Practice must be deliberate, with specific learning objectives, repeated practice, and informative feedback.
- Recipe for Deliberate Practice:
 - Choose a specific learning objective. One at a time works best.
 - Identify performance measures: How will I know if I improve? What will mastery look like?
 - Get feedback each and every time you practice.
 - Track your own performance in a systematic way (quick self-ratings are fine)
 - Client measures (e.g., if you’re working on defusion skills, track client defusion measures)
 - Peer or expert observation (audio, video, live) and specific feedback

My Deliberate Practice Plan

What skill will I work on? In what situations? How often?

How will I measure my performance? How often will I measure my performance?

How will I receive feedback? Clients? Peers? Experts?