

JOHNSON: Thank you for doing this.

MATT: Thank you for having us.

JOHNSON: I want you to know that when you do this, you give the most amazing gift to all of the therapists that are learning this approach, okay? We are very honored that you would do this. And that when you do this, you also give a gift to all kinds of other couples, because therapists come here to learn, and they are going to go out and they are going to help all kinds of other couples. So you are going to have impact on all kinds of couples that you have never even seen or met.

But it takes a lot of courage to do this. And I just want to thank you very much for trusting me, and for coming in and responding to our need to show people how this works, if they are really going to learn.

I don't know how much you know about me. I know a little bit about you, and by the way, I write down things as we go through the session. What I am writing down is I'm just writing down things you say that are really important, and it is my way of hanging onto them and not losing them, and being able to go back to them. So that is what I am writing down here.

Like, for example, you just said to me "compartmentalization." I just wrote it down because it really resonated with me when you said, "It is a good thing to learn. I learned it in the Navy and it is a strength." And sometimes it is kind of tricky in everyday life, because you put away in a box things that you need and that you need in your everyday life, and you take out other things. And it's tricky to know what to compartmentalize, right? I think that is really true. I think that is part of serving in the forces, that that is true.

MATT: Right.

JOHNSON: That's a kind of ongoing problem. So I'm parachuting into your lives here. And I guess I'd just like--I know quite a bit about you--I want to give you the chance, I want to help you feel as safe and comfortable with me as possible. So is there anything you want to ask me about me that would help you know a little bit about me or who I am?

RHEA: I did look you up and just was trying to get some background. I just was curious, in your own words, just exactly what is this Emotionally Focused Therapy, and how it is different than other sorts of marriage counseling?

JOHNSON: Basically what Emotionally Focused Therapy focuses on is the emotional bond between the two of you, because there is lots of research that says that if you guys know how to reach for each other and pull each other close, and hold each other--if you love each other my assumption is you can also scare the hell out of each other.

So what we are interested in, in this therapy, is helping you learn how to trust each other more, be more open to each other, knowing how to reach for each other when you need each other--create that safety between you. And that's our focus.

Other approaches might focus more on teaching you set communication skills or how to negotiate. We don't do that, because our experience with couples is if you guys can help each other when you get scared and anxious or when somebody has hurt feelings, if you can create safety and connection between the two of you, you can take care of all those other things.

So it focuses a lot on the emotional message you send each other. It focuses a lot on how you deal with your emotions. It focuses a lot on how you dance together. It's really about the focus we take. Does that help?

RHEA: Mm-hmm. **MATT:** Mm-hmm. That's pretty good.

JOHNSON: I don't know if you have read Hold Me Tight. Have you read Hold Me Tight?

RHEA: You know, somebody recommended that, or maybe it was--

JOHNSON: Probably Joshua.

RHEA: --the little survey. He gave us the little packets, so we were going to answer some questions and then we didn't get back to that, but he did give us some of that, and so we read that over, I think, individually.

MATT: Mm-hmm. **RHEA:** But I had not read the book--

JOHNSON: Well, it might be useful for you guys to read.

RHEA: --to be honest.

JOHNSON: Lots of guys like Hold Me Tight.

MATT: Yeah.

JOHNSON: Yeah, we use it a lot with--lots of military guys like Hold Me Tight because it gives you real logic and real scientific basis for what happens in couples, and it sort of sets it out, so. Women like it, too. But guys really seem to like it. That would be a good idea for you guys. So, you have seen Joshua, you have been into sessions--you have had about eight sessions, I think, have you not? Seven or eight sessions?

RHEA: Seems like more, but yeah. At least that.

JOHNSON: All right. So, can you help me--if I asked you guys right now, after seven or eight sessions, how are you feeling about your relationship right now? How do you see what is happening between the two of you right now? And I understand that your points of view might be different. And by the way, I'm parachuting in, so sometimes I put together what you say in a particular way. If I don't have it exactly right, if I am making assumptions or I am slightly off, I want you to correct me. I want you to say, "No Sue, it's not like that, it's more like this." That really helps me if you can do that.

All right, so how would you say you saw the relationship right now? Do you feel that the sessions have helped you? Or do you feel they haven't helped you? Do you feel stuck? Do you feel like things are starting to move? I'd like to know your take on things at the moment. How do you see things?

RHEA: Do you want to start?

MATT: You can. Go ahead.

RHEA: I think--we just kind of touched on it very briefly outside--but I think it was a rough last couple of days. And since our sessions, I would say our conflicts have gotten more frequent.

JOHNSON: More frequent?

RHEA: Mm-hmm. We were doing better. We had like a rough--we had rough, rough, rough--and then we were kind of at this point before the holidays, I think it was, that we were doing better, and Matt was doing his thing and I was trying to do mine. And I felt like we were kind of on the upswing.

JOHNSON: Okay, so you were on the upswing and then what happened?

RHEA: I can't remember which thing set it off. I don't know if it was the gift thing or what. But we just--there was something that happened.

JOHNSON: It was around Christmas?

RHEA: It was before. It was right before.

MATT: Yeah, we had a rough patch--

RHEA: Right before, I think.

MATT: --right before. And then through the holidays. And then our last session was a pretty rough session as well.

RHEA: Distant, I just felt.

MATT: I think for me the overall value of the sessions has been really good, but it's kind of one of those things. It feels like now that we are breaking it down--

RHEA: We're breaking down.

MATT: --and things are getting really hard and we are having trouble communicating and we're arguing more, before we build it back up. That's what it feels like to me. We have been dissecting and finding out all of these problems. And to me it's been--

JOHNSON: It's almost like you've been standing in the middle now of all this stuff, maybe looking at it more. And right now it almost feels worse.

MATT: Right. Right.

RHEA: It feels more hopeless than I have actually ever felt.

JOHNSON: Does it?

MATT: Well, especially the last couple of days, we have been really, we have had a really tough--we had a lot of arguing. We are just not seeing eye to eye. We actually went away for the weekend to Sequoia National Park. And the weekend was good, but there was just the vibe of tension. You know, we are in a really beautiful place and it's good to get away, but, for me, there's just this haze of tension.

RHEA: We had a fight last week.

JOHNSON: You guys are waiting for this tension to come up and take you over and get you caught in this dance.

MATT: Yeah.

RHEA: Or we just--for me it was that we had a thing last week. My mom had some doctor appointment that was very stressful, and I was waiting for the outcome of that, which then that was going to determine for me--oh, sorry--whether we went on this trip. And then we had had this fight, and then I said, "Should we still go on this?" And he said, "I think it would be good to get some R&R." And then my mom's thing was okay, so we went ahead with it.

So it was this crap and then this stress with outside, with my mom, and then we decided to go. So, it was okay, it was really beautiful and we did okay. We didn't have any problems up there but we both, I think, were trying really hard.

JOHNSON: So you were in a beautiful place where maybe that longing to be close might come up, but instead there was all this tension? Am I getting it?

RHEA: No.

MATT: No, the--

RHEA: It was just tense before. And then we tried to put that away and go on with our trip, and have a nice time, and be with our daughter, and enjoy this beautiful place we have never been and have been like, "Okay, we are going to do this someday." We finally did it. But it was just a little--there was a little bit of crap sprinkled on it that we both kind of, I think, tried to put away.

MATT: Yeah, and whenever--

JOHNSON: So you did manage to sort of have somewhat of a nice time.

RHEA: Yeah.

MATT: Yeah, it was a nice time. We have our four-year old daughter that we brought with us. And she is into this phase where she is kind of being defiant and asking a gazillion questions. And then it creates a level of tension there. We are trying to have fun, we are like sledding, and she is having like a lot of problems with it and--

RHEA: Suddenly. When everybody else is laughing and sliding down the slope.

JOHNSON: Yeah.

MATT: But we are trying to and then--

RHEA: Matt did really well with that. I didn't do so well.

MATT: --that becomes an effort to where we try to work together to resolve the situation but then--

RHEA: I got stressed out.

MATT: You get stressed out and so then--

JOHNSON: Could you work together? Did you?

RHEA: Pretty good.

MATT: We try, yeah, but then there is that communication thing where we are really trying not to step on that person's toes, and we are just being so delicate--

JOHNSON: Being careful.

MATT: Yes.

JOHNSON: Being careful. So you are suddenly aware of how careful you are being.

RHEA: Yes.

MATT: Yeah, yeah.

JOHNSON: And then you say, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, what's happening here?"

COMMENTARY: So right now what I'm doing is I'm trying to create some safety, and just start to move the couple into talking about their relationship so I can get a sense of their perceptions, take the temperature of the relationship, find out what's going on now.

JOHNSON: And you were aware of that carefulness as well?

RHEA: I think we are aware of it. I'm aware of it. I can't speak for Matthew but--because we have been together for so long, it never--seems like it didn't used to be this hard to have a good time.

JOHNSON: So it's discouraging for you, it's discouraging for you right now that you say, "How come we can't just have a good time in this beautiful place? How come we have to be so careful? Because we are getting caught in this dreadful dance."

RHEA: I just didn't want--I don't think either one of us--who wants something to happen, a fight to happen? But I think we just were trying to make the best of it. And Matt tried really hard, especially when Sophia, our daughter, was just kind of, "Ahh," because I went, "Argh."

JOHNSON: You know that he tries hard?

RHEA: I know he was trying hard in that, especially in that instance with our daughter. I knew that he was really trying to be the one lasting calm in this--nothing major, just a meltdown. But then I started to melt down. So I know that he tries, in those instances especially.

JOHNSON: Right. You know he tries, but somehow you are both aware of this tension, and you are aware that you are being careful in case you get caught up in this--I think Joshua told me you call it the Clash of the Titans?

MATT: Yes.

RHEA: Yes, for years, and then they made a movie about it.

JOHNSON: So, you help me. Are you--in a way, it is painful when you really start to become aware of how caught you are in this dance, right? That is a kind of painful moment. And from talking to Joshua, do you feel that you guys are more clear about what music is playing, what emotional music is playing and how you do get caught up in that dance in those fights?

MATT: No.

COMMENTARY: Right from the beginning I'm talking about the dance between them. I'm talking about their problem in terms of a dance between them that they both get caught up in. I am not talking about who starts it or who's to blame--I'm talking about the dance. And here I am, I'm naming it. I'm giving it a name. I'm calling it--and it comes from them, I'm using their words--I'm calling it the Clash of Titans. So now we are starting to move into what is actually going wrong in the relationship and what that looks like.

RHEA: No. I mean--I don't, because it seems very clear to me, some things that are just, they are like those nothing fights. I don't really know why we had a fight sometimes. Sometimes I do. Some things are just so--seems very petty. And, again, after all this time together, I don't remember Matthew being this--taking things and having these fights. Just sometimes they are valid, and sometimes I just really don't know where it comes from or why.

JOHNSON: So that must be even more distressing and confusing, because some part of you is saying, "I don't even know why we are getting so caught in these issues." But you know that there is this tension there. And you help me here. That tension, as I am understanding from Joshua, that tension for you--there's a lot of stuff in that tension, about how you want to be closer to Matt.

RHEA: Yes.

JOHNSON: You want to be more connected to Matt. You want to be closer. That is what you are longing for?

RHEA: I want to feel unique to Matthew.

JOHNSON: You want to feel unique and special to him?

RHEA: Yes. And I don't feel that way, and I don't know if he feels that way. And it seems like we have lost that.

COMMENTARY: What is happening here is she is saying, "We get caught in a lot of content fights, nothing fights, fight about content." And immediately what I do is I go to the attachment significance of the fights. I go to her emotions and I use something that Joshua has told me, which is that, from her point of view, her distress and her upset and her reactive anger is all about the fact that she doesn't feel special and unique to her partner.

This is the attachment pain and panic that is fueling her behavior in the negative cycle--her anger and her complaints to her husband. So I start going now to the attachment meaning and I say, "The fight is really about this attachment issue, isn't it?" I don't frame it like that--I frame it in terms of her emotions.

JOHNSON: And that hurts. That hurts you, right?

RHEA: Definitely.

JOHNSON: That hurts you to have lost that, right? Are there ever moments right now when you feel unique and special, when that feeling comes back?

RHEA: There was one, when we went to the VA. I don't know if you saw that part, with the VA. And we went and I was with him, and I felt like I was doing something. And Matt didn't say, "I need you," but I just felt like I was being a significant part and a support.

JOHNSON: You went for some sort of evaluation?

MATT: Yeah, my PTSD evaluation.

JOHNSON: Right, and so you went to support him and you--

RHEA: He asked me, "Would you go with me?"

JOHNSON: He asked you.

RHEA: "I would like--I need a witness for this, and I want you to be there so that you can see this and this." And I said, "Okay," because I have only heard about it. I've only heard it from him.

JOHNSON: So, in that moment, you felt he asked you, you got the message, "I need you. You are important to me. I need you to be there." And in that moment you felt, "Oh, here is that feeling of specialness, like I really matter to him, like I'm important to him." That was important to you.

RHEA: Yes. I didn't think that then. What I thought was, "I know this is really stressful for him and I know that he hates doing this. So I can totally do this for him and with him." And then afterwards when he said, "I'm glad you were there, or helped me," something like that, and then he brought me flowers that night out of the blue and said, "Thank you for being there"--that made me feel special.

When I was there I just felt like, "I'm really glad I get to be here for him," because even though I didn't get to say very much, I felt like I was glad that he could see me there for him. I was glad that I could just be in the room.

JOHNSON: Because you want to be there for him?

RHEA: Because that's how I feel. I am, and I have said this analogy before. I feel like I am always there. You just can't always see me.

JOHNSON: It's like you are saying to him, "Can you see me? Can you see me? I'm standing here. I really want to be your safe place. I want to be your supporter. I want to be there for you." Yeah?

So you help me, yeah? When you went with him, and when he turned and gave you the flowers, suddenly you felt seen? You felt like he saw that you were really wanting to stand by his side even though this clash, this tension can come along and take you over and get you caught in this dreadful stuff. You felt like he was seeing you and seeing that you wanted to be there?

RHEA: I felt like I was out of the ordinary, something special, that I was there for him, and that he appreciated it. And I didn't need the flowers, but it made me realize that I really--it meant something to him.

JOHNSON: Because you long for that?

RHEA: I long for that. And I like that. And I don't need to always get flowers. But I would like to just be acknowledged that, "I know you are here, Rhea, and I appreciate that," or "I know you do this." But that time he saw me. And that's, I think, what the difference is. I just--I don't know how to convey that.

JOHNSON: That fills you up?

RHEA: Yes.

COMMENTARY: What is happening here is typical in that she is moving into, now, as I start to talk about these needs that she has, these longings she has. She starts to talk about how underlying all of these arguments and these little picky fights they are having is the attachment issue, that she is saying, "I don't feel special to you. Are you there for me? Do I matter to you?"--which is the \$94 million question that underlies all the important arguments that couples have. So she is bringing up this attachment issue here that is really underneath all of these arguments.

RHEA: That I'm always there and I just need you to know that sometimes.

JOHNSON: Can you hear her?

MATT: I do. I do.

JOHNSON: What happens to you when you--what happens to you when you hear her say that she's--in spite of all this tension you guys get caught in, and this negative dance that you are actually just starting to really understand and maybe even getting more poignant right now, right?

MATT: Mm-hmm. **JOHNSON:** When you lose each other--that this lady, a lot of what is going on with her is this incredible longing--and you stop me if I get it off, okay--this incredible longing to know she is special to you, to know that she really matters to you, and to know that you know that she really wants to be with you. Can you hear her?

MATT: I do hear her, yes.

JOHNSON: What happens to you when she says that? What is that like to hear?

MATT: I feel like in this instance, I feel like she dropped her own pretenses and issues with me to do this for me. There was--

JOHNSON: She reached out for you. She came to stand beside your side, by your side.

MATT: Yes, but at the same time like dropping all of the issues she has with me at that time to do that, but then they go right back up after that. I do want to firmly believe that she is there for me all the time, but I also get a feeling of doubt.

RHEA: But why, is what I don't understand.

MATT: Because there is the constant conquest of who is right and who has the last word.

JOHNSON: You get into who is right?

MATT: That is the clash of the titans--who is right.

JOHNSON: Who is to blame?

MATT: No.

JOHNSON: Who's right?

MATT: Who's right. And who has the last word.

JOHNSON: It's so tricky, isn't it?

MATT: And who can be the power--it's a power struggle, or ability to be in control.

JOHNSON: So who is right and who gets to define things. Who gets to say the way it is, right?

MATT: Right.

JOHNSON: And you get all caught up in that to the point where, what I am hearing is, both of you end up starving to death, right? Feeling like you have doubt. You are not sure if this lady can really be there for you. And you feel like you are not important to him. So you both end up hurting.

RHEA: Really I'm not quite sure. I don't really know. I know we--I don't really understand what you are saying. I don't know how that happens. I don't know what you are saying, how that happens that we are constantly--

JOHNSON: You don't see it that way that it is all about who's right?

RHEA: No. Because there are some things that are just stupid fights that I have no idea who cares. In the whole spectrum of life we have so many other things that are either bigger, more important, or are--

JOHNSON: I'm going to interrupt you sometimes, guys. Sometimes I am going to slow you down. Is that all right?

MATT: Yeah.

JOHNSON: Well, my sense is the stupid fights only sound stupid because you focus on the little incident that happened, right, like somebody spilling a cup or something. In fact it is the tension coming out, right? It sounds like what the fights are about for you is something about--it's like you are saying to Matt, "Matt, where are you, where are you? I need to know I am special to you. I need to know you want to be close to me. I need to know I matter. Where are you, where are you?" And when you don't get a response, that really upsets you, right? That sounds like that's what it's mostly about for you. Am I getting it?

RHEA: Yes. And here's part of that, is not only am I not getting that, I don't always need that, because I realize Matthew has other things going on within him physically and emotionally, and there are other external factors. I don't need all of that all the time, but then I feel like it's actually, he's looking for something that I haven't done to pick on. And I don't know why--not only am I not getting anything in, but he is actually taking away the little reserve I have left.

JOHNSON: So, you help me. You are saying to me, "Sue, the two things that move me into this tension is I don't feel, I'm not sure of really feeling loved and special and connected with Matthew, and that really hurts. But also then at times he feels he is irritated with me or he is critical of me, and what I get is somehow that I am disappointing to him."

RHEA: Yes.

JOHNSON: "So, I don't get the reassurance that I really matter and I'm really important, and sometimes when he gets upset with me I get that he is critical of me."

RHEA: It's like a no-win. There is no--it's a no-win situation. I can't seem to do the right thing.

JOHNSON: And what do you do when you feel either--I'm using words, you help me if they are off--either somehow starved and like you don't, like you are saying to Matt, "Are you there for me? Are you there for me?" and no real clear answer comes back, and in fact sometimes he turns and maybe says something critical? What do you do then, Rhea?

COMMENTARY: What I'm doing here is I'm starting to focus down on the attachment issue and the attachment fears and questions underneath the power struggle, the obvious content of the fights. And I am starting to track her steps in the dance--how she feels and how she manages her feelings. What does she actually do when she feels either cut off and abandoned by him or criticized and blamed by him?

JOHNSON: When that happens to you, what do you do?

RHEA: Sometimes I then get defensive, or I blow up.

JOHNSON: So you blow up?

RHEA: I just get mad, or I launch into the whole other stuff that I have put down and pushed down and kept out of the conversation and don't talk about.

JOHNSON: So you get angry.

RHEA: I get angry, and then it just kind of, blergh, and it comes up. Because I can only keep so much in and keep losing so much that I finally am like--

JOHNSON: So all of this hurt and resentment comes up, and it comes out. And then what do you do?

MATT: Well, there is the whole underlying tone of our intimacy. We don't have our intimacy. And Rhea really, really craves that. So what happens to me, I think, there is the little nothing fight, but then it immediately, it's just the pebble for the pearl to really get the catalyst to get Rhea started about this intimacy thing. It happens every day. She brings it up every day almost.

And it makes me upset. It makes me angry. I'm doing the best I can. I've described to Joshua, sometimes I feel like I am just on this island and it is very protective to me, or on my cave. And that's the only way I feel comfortable, is in my cave, just by totally isolating myself. I can't. I can't give.

JOHNSON: I'm going to slow you down right now, okay?

MATT: Yes.

JOHNSON: Because you are saying so many important things, all right? So what you are saying, what we are doing here is we are talking about these steps in this dance that you get caught in, that leave you both, I presume, both feeling alone and unhappy and tense.

RHEA: Totally.

JOHNSON: But we are also talking about the music that is playing in this dance--the emotional music that's playing, that's going on. What's going on for you is you are feeling somehow deprived. You are not sure you are loved. That is very hurtful. You don't know you matter. You don't feel close. You feel criticized. So you get upset, and then you hear that she is angry with you and you--help me here, Matt, because it sounds like there are lots of things happening for you in that moment.

Rhea gets upset and you say some incredibly powerful things. You say, "I get upset because I'm hearing," what, "I'm hearing a message"--you help me here--"I'm hearing a message that I'm disappointing her." Is that it? Am I getting it right?

MATT: That's right, I'm disappointing her, yes.

JOHNSON: So, "I'm hearing that I'm disappointing her, and then this thought that comes in is, 'But I'm doing the best I can. I'm doing the best I can and somehow'--what? 'Somehow I am dealing with so much here.' And when you turn and tell me that I'm disappointing you, I'm dealing with so much here, some part of me just wants to go off into my cave. Some part of me says, 'I'm dealing with so much. I just don't know how to turn and actually tune into you and give you what you want.'"

COMMENTARY: What I'm doing here is I'm trying to go in and find out about his emotional reality. And I'm very careful to ask him to correct me. I'm very careful. I'm tracking his experience, following his experience and then maybe going to the edge of it and expanding a little, asking him to correct me. And he says he doesn't understand what's going on, but actually, as we stay here and explore it, it starts to come out pretty clearly. What he's saying is "I withdraw. I withdraw because I'm just, I don't know what's going on here, so I just go to my cave." And of course the more he goes to his cave, the more abandoned and upset and angry she is going to become.

JOHNSON: You help me, Matt.

MATT: You are getting it. The term "dealing with it" may not best describe it. It's more like I don't really understand it myself. You know, I'm a fixer. I can fix a lot of things and I know how to deal with a lot of problems, but I don't understand why I don't want to have intimacy with my wife, or I don't understand why my sex drive is super low. And that turns in, to me, is that I can't fix it. I don't understand what's going on here, so I'm just going to retreat to my cave, or get angry and flip it onto her, just flip it onto her and say, "Well, okay, I'm just going to be angry about this and, blergh. I'm going to pick on you, then."

JOHNSON: Okay, so help me here, guys. This is good stuff. All right. So what you are telling me is the dance you get caught in is you feel like you are never sure you are really important. You're hungry for more connection with your partner. And there is tension between the two of you. You are both worried about getting into these fights. You say something to him, you get angry, this spills out of you, you hear that she is disappointed.

And you're in this confused state where you don't really understand what is going on, but your instinct is that you are trying the best you can. It is somehow, my sense is, this is overwhelming somehow. You don't really understand what is going on. And some part of your brain says, "I don't know how to fix this. There's only one way out of this. What I'm going to do is I just want to go off into my cave." We talked about compartmentalizing is a real skill you learned in the military. Right?

MATT: Yeah, right.

JOHNSON: That saved your life a thousand times in the military, that ability to compartmentalize, right?

MATT: Yes.

JOHNSON: So it's natural that that is a place you go. You say, "I'm going to shut down and move away and go in my cave." The tricky part about that one is, of course, when you do that, she is going to feel shut out. Or, you say, "The other way of dealing with it when I hear that I am disappointing is, the other way of dealing with it is to fight--is to say, 'No, you're wrong.'"

MATT: Yeah, flip it.

JOHNSON: "You're wrong. You shouldn't--I'm going to flip it. You're wrong."

RHEA: "It's not me, it's you."

JOHNSON: "It's not me, it's you." So, we have a fight about who it is, right?

MATT: Yes, right.

JOHNSON: Who's the bad guy here?

MATT: Right. Exactly.

JOHNSON: But in fact there's really no bad guys. You are both caught in this dreadful dance and you are both hurting.

MATT: Mm-hmm. **JOHNSON:** So you flip it. And I just want to stay with the dance for a minute and then I want to come back and talk about your feelings, because you are saying, "I don't understand them." So, if you flip it, and so, if he withdraws or flips into anger, which is the only way he knows how to deal with that message from you that he is disappointing you, what do you do? What's the next step in the dance? What do you do there?

RHEA: Well, the last couple of times it got a little ugly. It got a little physical, and that kind of scared me. A couple of nights ago when we got into it I just tried to stop. I said, "I don't want to fight anymore. I don't want to do this, I'm not going to get into this, I'm going to go to bed." And he pursued me.

And I mean pursued, came looking to keep getting into it, to keep getting into it, to keep getting into this fight. So it depends on what the situation is. Sometimes I feel like my points are very valid. So I'm going to--

JOHNSON: So hang on with me, hang on with me. Sometimes--you help me--I'm hearing, sometimes you will stand and fight because you really want to be heard.

RHEA: Yes, because I don't believe it. I don't believe that you can actually stand there and tell me that this is a problem and that I did this, and this, and this, and this, and all the while all this over here is not going on. There is nothing here that is filling up any good part of me. And you are going to actually criticize this part of me?

JOHNSON: Right, so you are saying, "I'm standing here all by myself, needing your reassurance that you love me, and now you turn and criticize me. I can't bear it, and I want you to hear that I can't bear it." So, you will stand and fight, but now you are saying, "Actually Sue, now sometimes I am getting really scared that it might even get into a physical fight, so I am starting to withdraw."

RHEA: Because it is not going to get anywhere. That is what I am realizing. It doesn't get anywhere.

COMMENTARY: Here I am keeping my focus of outlining the steps in the dance, the negative cycle. And at the same time, I am trying to empathize with her, listen to her, and as she is listened to, that helps her contain her emotion. I decide not to follow the issue of violence right here. That is going to take us off into another area.

What I'm going to do, I'm going to stay with my focus here outlining the cycle. But what I'm going to do is I decide I'm going to ask Joshua, in another session that isn't being watched by all kinds of people, to go into the violence issue and make sure that that is contained.

RHEA: Matt has his opinions. I have my opinions. I know what I feel is right. I'm sure he has what he thinks is right. Or maybe he doesn't. But I just can't win. I cannot get that point across. There is no, "You know what, Rhea, I'm sorry you feel that way." Or, "I don't know what to tell you, but I love you." There's no defusing statement. It's always about me.

JOHNSON: Right, and so you end up feeling so hurt, and you feel hopeless, and there's no way out. So you've started to shut down and withdraw, too, right?

RHEA: Yep. And I'm not that way. I'm not--I don't do that. That's not my way. I like to face things. I like to get it out. I'm a fixer also.

JOHNSON: Can you hear where Rhea goes with this, that she goes into that sense of hopelessness that she can't reach you? And so she moves away. What's it like for you when she starts to move away?

MATT: But I don't think she moves away. She doesn't move away. It just crescendos, it just escalates.

RHEA: Inside me.

MATT: It just escalates. I'm not seeing what's inside of her.

JOHNSON: Okay, I guess what I am saying is how does it end up, guys? Do you just decide--do you just get too exhausted to fight? How does it end up, this dance? Do you just, somehow somebody gets tired and falls asleep, or somebody walks away, or how do you bring it to a close?

RHEA: The other day he ripped the sheets off the bed and took them into the other, extra room and wouldn't let me get other sheets. And that's how it ended.

MATT: We just retreat to--

JOHNSON: You retreat. You both retreat. You have the clash of the titans, everyone feels hopeless. I'm presuming you feel hopeless in that moment, too, do you?

MATT: Yeah, totally.

JOHNSON: Okay, so both of you feel hopeless. You are caught up in this sort of dreadful firefight, trying to prove, "Well, it's your fault. I'm not the wrong." And then there is a retreat, and then what? There is a sort of pause, and then it all starts up again? Are we getting it?

RHEA: And then get up, go to work. We get up in the morning and Matt had to go to work, and I went to work, and so our daughter needs to get ready. And we just did our thing.

MATT: And then there's just the mechanical actions of life after that.

RHEA: And then he came home last night and we don't--he says hello and it's just that weird, tense.

JOHNSON: And that's incredibly demoralizing, right? That argument that you are getting--but you know guys, when I look at the things you have been through, I mean, you were deployed, and you were in constant danger, as I understand it. Right?

MATT: Right.

JOHNSON: And that is hard, right? I work a lot with military couples. That's a real hard one, right?

MATT: Mm-hmm. **JOHNSON:** And when you were deployed--please help me if I am getting it wrong--if you were like the other people I've worked with, you had to stuff your feelings and do your job.

MATT: Yes.

JOHNSON: You had to shut your feelings down and do your job, right?

MATT: Yes.

JOHNSON: So then you come home with all kinds--suddenly you are back in a different world, right?

MATT: Mm-hmm. **JOHNSON:** But you can't just turn your emotions off like that.

MATT: Right.

JOHNSON: And it's really hard to know what to do with that, right?

MATT: Mm-hmm. **JOHNSON:** So that is hard on a relationship. Also, you have a little four-year-old. Also, you have had a big transition because you left the military.

MATT: Several transitions, yes. I retired. We moved.

JOHNSON: And you're still dealing with--

RHEA: I stopped teaching.

JOHNSON: You stopped teaching?

RHEA: We had a lot of different big life changes.

JOHNSON: You are dealing with the echoes of war, here?

RHEA: Can I just say one thing about that--is that when Matt came back in 2003 and then things were difficult, and we went through some counseling, and then he ended up getting transferred to Pensacola, and so then we came back together. We always do well when we get shipped off together. We just made the most of our life and things were okay. Then when we moved back, something triggered this. So it wasn't right after he got back, which is also part of the trouble. It's really hard for me to--I don't get it. I don't understand it.

JOHNSON: Rhea, it hardly ever is straight after somebody gets back, okay? It's almost like--I don't quite know how that is because I have never been to war, but I've just experienced with the couples I've worked with and the men that I have worked with, okay? It's almost like at first there is a huge shift, you get back, you are just pleased to be back.

MATT: Right. It's a honeymoon.

JOHNSON: And for a while everything sort of feels all right. But it is almost like, then, as you start to feel safe, it is almost like your body feels safe enough to say, "Wait a minute, I'm still haunted by these images. Wait a minute, I'm still--"

RHEA: But it's like six years. It was like six years, and we were doing pretty good. We have always had our things and we have always come through it. We've worked hard. Matt's worked hard at being different than he was raised. I've worked hard at not having my expectations so high. We have come together, we've moved forward. We've always done--in the past we have come out of these things.

JOHNSON: And you are going to come out of this, too, all right?

RHEA: It just feels different.

MATT: It does feel different this time. It really does. It feels like you can't fix it. I don't have the tools--or not even that. It's just like I don't know how to communicate to fix it.

JOHNSON: It's okay.

RHEA: But it seems like--

JOHNSON: I understand. But you know what? We have the tools.

RHEA: Good.

JOHNSON: It's all right. But it's hard. And for most people it is really, really scary to suddenly find that the person you love sometimes looks like the enemy, and that you don't know how to get that loving feeling back. That's very, very, very scary. Yeah?

MATT: Mm-hmm. JOHNSON: And it is hugely demoralizing.

MATT: Yeah.

JOHNSON: So I'm really glad that you are with Joshua. I'm really glad that you are in therapy and you are working on this, because we know how to help you with it. But when you get caught in this pattern, this dance, this clash of titans, and all that is left for the two of you is to somehow struggle with the only booby prize is somebody maybe can be right here, right?

MATT: I know.

JOHNSON: Even though we are scaring each other half to death and we both feel alone, the booby prize is "who's right." When that's all you are left with it is very, very scary and demoralizing.

RHEA: I don't even need a "who's right." I don't need to always be right. I would just like to be heard. "I hear that you feel that way, Rhea. I don't mean it to be like that. I love you." That would be okay. I don't need to hear that everything I've said is right. "I don't really agree with you, Rhea, but I hear what you are saying. And I love you. And I don't know what to do now, so I got to go."

JOHNSON: Right, so you help me. You are saying something incredibly powerful to this man. What you are saying to him, if I am hearing you right, is you are saying to him, "Matt, I don't need you to be perfect. I don't need to be right. I don't need you to be right."

RHEA: I don't need you to fix it right this second.

JOHNSON: "I don't need you to fix it. It's okay for me to be disappointed sometimes. I just need to know that I am important to you and you can reach for me. That's all I need to know."

COMMENTARY: What I am doing here is outlining and going and reflecting her attachment hurts, her attachment needs and longings, and listening to her. My assumption is validating her, reflecting her feelings, helps calm her down and be able to come more into the moment and stay with the present process.

RHEA: "I'm sorry you are upset, Rhea, and I love you." Something like that.

JOHNSON: "I'm sorry. I care about how you feel. I care that you are hurt."

RHEA: "I don't mean it to sound like that."

JOHNSON: "And even though we are getting caught in this dreadful dance here, I love you." You need reassurance, yeah?

RHEA: Yes.

JOHNSON: That's what you are telling him?

RHEA: Yes.

JOHNSON: You are saying to him, in those moments--

RHEA: "I love you. Even though it sounds like I don't love you, and even though I don't know what to do for you and I can't really be this person and I don't have anything for you, I do love you. And I don't want--"

JOHNSON: "Even though you might be telling me, Matt, that you don't know how to be with me right now, and that you are overwhelmed right now, what I need is somehow to know that you are still struggling to be with me, I matter to you, and that you love me in spite of all this."

RHEA: Because I don't really know that he loves me right now.

JOHNSON: "I need reassurance." That's what you are telling him?

RHEA: I just don't know that he loves me really.

JOHNSON: Can you tell him that right now?

COMMENTARY: This is the first time that I create an enactment, which is a central part of EFT. What I have done is gone in and tried to distill her emotions, really focusing on the attachment meaning, and get a more clear sense of her core emotions, her primary feelings underneath all of this anger, and then ask her to give this emotional signal, this clearer emotional signal about these underlying feelings to her partner.

JOHNSON: "Even in those dreadful moments, it would help me so much not to spiral down into despair to know that even though we are caught in this dreadful clash of titans, that I still matter to you. That you love me." Can you tell him that? "That's what I'm longing to know. That's what would fix it for me in that moment." Can you tell him that?

RHEA: It would help me calm down. And it would help me stop trying to be right or to make my point to you if you could just--

JOHNSON: "Reassure me."

RHEA: --somehow reassure me and tell me that you love me. Or make some gesture that would just--

JOHNSON: "Reach for me, yeah? That if you reach for me?"

RHEA: Anything would be nice, to make me feel like you don't just, have nothing for me.

JOHNSON: Right.

MATT: I hear what you're saying. I hear that. My immediate reaction is "Nobody is doing that for me and I'm putting forth one more effort. My finger is in the dam and the water is lapping over. And I've got to do one more thing?"

RHEA: Because nothing gets done for you at home and I don't try to make us--I don't try to do my part in our life? I don't understand what that means.

JOHNSON: Guys, I'm going to--Guys.

MATT: That is a conflict. That is a conflict, what goes on at home.

JOHNSON: Guys, I'm going to slow it down, okay? I want you to notice what we are doing here. You have only been with me a few minutes. You don't know me. We have already outlined the dance you get caught in. It's a real regular dance. All kinds of couples get caught in it, especially when one person is dealing with the echoes of war. All right?

I want you to notice you have talked about the dance, and it is not all your relationship. At times it looks like it is all your relationship. We are already doing this. You both are amazingly honest. You are both amazingly willing to risk. You are being incredibly open with me. So now we have talked about the dance. And you were very honest. And you said, "I do get angry. I do tell you I'm disappointed. But actually what this is about is I really need reassurance that you love me and you need me." Right?

And you were very honest there, and you are talking now about what happens to you when you hear her telling you that you are really important to her, that somehow you go to the place where you don't hear it as an invitation or a gift, where this lady is telling you, "You are the most important person in my life. You are the most important person in my life, Matt. I just need your touch, you smile and your caring." You don't hear it that--you hear it as a demand, right? You hear it--somehow there is something that gets in the way. What do you hear? Because I am interested in the emotional signals she sends and the music you hear that makes it so hard for you to help her step out of this negative pattern and help you step out of the negative pattern and learn how to create trust and safety again. Because that is what we are doing here. We are going to help you guys create trust and safety again, all right?

COMMENTARY: What I'm doing here is I'm containing the escalation that is happening in a classic EFT way by reflecting the process, validating, reflecting the emotions--people calm down when they feel heard--creating order, summarizing what's going on, and refocusing the session. So I'm taking control of the moment it looks like they are going to escalate again. I'm staying focused on the emotion, and I'm going to go in and work with him.

JOHNSON: Are you all right?

RHEA: Mm-hmm. **JOHNSON:** Rhea, are you with me?

RHEA: I'm with you. I just have something else to say after he's done. I would like to.

JOHNSON: Okay, here's what I want you to do when I'm asking this question. I understand you have something else to say.

RHEA: You want me to listen.

JOHNSON: Yes. I want you to just put it on the shelf for a minute. I will come back to you, I promise, all right? Right now I just want you to be with him, okay? So, what I am hearing is this lady says to you, "Even when we are caught in this dreadful pattern that scares the hell out of both of us, there is this moment when all I really need, Matt, is the reassurance that you love me."

And you are saying to your lady here, you are saying, "Somehow in these arguments I hear that I am disappointing you. Somehow in these arguments I just get to a place where I want to retreat. I want to go in my cave. Or I want to fight and take control and stop the fight. I want to fix it by taking control. And when you turn and tell me after all this tension in the relationship, when I am hearing that I am not doing what you want me to do, you are trying to tell me you need me to say I love you, I'm stuck. I'm stuck, I can't do it. I'm stuck here." Right?

"Somehow that response that would pull me back to you and reassure us both that there is a connection between us, I can't do it. I'm stuck. I'm stuck between running in my cave, fighting you. I'm stuck." Is that what you are telling me? Help me, Matt. Is that what you are telling me?

MATT: Yeah. Because I think what happens for me is I hear everything she says. And I take that and I put it into a compartment because I really, I almost need a copilot to turn to and go, "Hey, what would you do about this?" You know? But I don't have that copilot, so I have to compartmentalize it. And I have to really process my own conflict of nobody is doing that for me. Nobody is helping me. So how can I give that up? How can I--I don't know how to respond. I can't do that.

COMMENTARY: This man's strength is that he can reach his emotions. He uses them through images, very powerful images. What I'm doing here is I am going in and helping him unpack his emotions, the stuck place he goes to when he can't respond to his wife.

MATT: I hear you, but I can't do that.

JOHNSON: I need to understand this, so I want you to help me understand, okay?

MATT: Mm-hmm. **JOHNSON:** I love the image that you need a copilot.

RHEA: We're good at the analogies.

JOHNSON: Yeah. In a way I really understand you, because we all need a copilot, don't we? Yeah? You are saying, "You help me." This is hard to talk about, yeah, for you? This is hard to talk about?

MATT: I always had a copilot. During the war--

JOHNSON: Someone you could lean on and turn to who was your--you could check, right?

MATT: When things got really hard. Really dangerous.

JOHNSON: Right. But suddenly your experience is you are in danger again. You are in danger again. Your lady is upset with you. You don't know how to fix it.

RHEA: We also had--

JOHNSON: Hang on.

RHEA: I'm sorry.

JOHNSON: You don't know how to fix it. You are hearing she is disappointed, right? And suddenly you are in danger again and you don't have any copilot and you don't know what to do, yeah?

MATT: Yeah.

JOHNSON: And that is overwhelming for you, Matt? That's overwhelming, yeah?

MATT: Yeah it's overwhelming.

JOHNSON: Yeah, I hear you.

MATT: Because I want to know what to do. I need to--I want to fix this. I want it to be better. I want--

JOHNSON: You want to be with this lady?

MATT: Yeah. Yeah, I do.

JOHNSON: Right, and that is the irony, isn't it? That you do want to be with this lady and the reason that you are getting so overwhelmed maybe is actually, ironically, she does matter to you. That's why you are freaking out, right? When you hear that you are not giving her what she wants and she is disappointed, right?

MATT: Yeah.

JOHNSON: Because she matters so much that you are freaking out. But let's go back here. You are overwhelmed. You are overwhelmed in that moment. You are saying, "I want to fix it, I don't want to lose this lady, I am overwhelmed here, I don't know what to do. And I don't have any copilot. I don't have anyone to turn to tell me what to do now," yeah?

MATT: Which is a long time. Like my parents, I never could turn to them and say, "I need some advice." They never would do that. And so it has been this long thing, you know.

RHEA: We had our dogs, too. I think Matt needs--we had two dogs that we had for 14 years. And Matt would get a lot of his own, I think, personal therapy from that.

MATT: I would walk them every day.

RHEA: I don't think he has quite the outlet that he used to have.

JOHNSON: You get lots of comfort from your dogs?

MATT: I did.

RHEA: They both--

JOHNSON: Yeah, well, I hear you because that is a place that lots of us go, right? Dogs are always pleased to see us. Dogs love us no matter what.

COMMENTARY: I am unpacking his underlying emotions that go on in that moment when he can't respond. It's interesting to note when he starts to talk about his more vulnerable feelings, she calms down and starts to say things that are more supportive. When he sends a new signal, her response starts to change.

JOHNSON: Dogs comfort us, yeah.

RHEA: Everything lost its focus on being able to fix itself, I think, around the time that we lost the dogs. And then we were moving, and there was just, you know, moving stresses. And we bought a house and we fixed it up. There wasn't a lot of outlets for Matt other than going--

JOHNSON: And now when you get overwhelmed, it's tricky, right, because maybe you could have turned to your dogs or you could even have gone to this lady and said, "I would like a hug." But now you can't do that because she is the one who is saying, she is the one who is creating the tension and you don't know how to fix it. Right?

MATT: Yeah.

JOHNSON: She's the one who is saying, "There's something wrong, Matt," and you are hearing that you are disappointing and that is so overwhelming for you that you end up, your brain just says, "I don't know how to fix this. I'm feeling like she is asking me for something. I'm overwhelmed. I don't even know how to give. I don't even know how to turn back to her. I just want to run off in my cave. Or I want to take control and tell her to stop."

MATT: Yeah.

JOHNSON: Then of course the tricky part is if she just hears you--

MATT: It's anger then.

JOHNSON: --she just sees you as indifferent and angry.

RHEA: Totally.

MATT: Mm-hmm. **JOHNSON:** But in fact--you help me, Matt--actually you are not indifferent. And you are not just angry. You are desperately trying to grab control. In fact, what you are if we just go down in the elevator a little bit to the emotions underneath, is you are overwhelmed and really scared. Is that all right? Is that all right, what I just said?

MATT: I don't--

JOHNSON: This is a different kind of danger.

MATT: It's a different kind of scared. I mean, I don't know--I wouldn't--

JOHNSON: It's not the same scared as in a helicopter. It's a scared of you don't want to lose this lady.

MATT: Yes. Yes. I don't want to lose that bond. Rhea was my copilot for a long, long time, you know. She was the one person that really understood me. And somehow that got disengaged from my last deployment, from my tour and stuff. It got disengaged big time because I had to shut that off totally to be able to function in that environment.

JOHNSON: I understand.

COMMENTARY: What he is talking about here is classic. He is talking about how when you go to war you have to shut down and numb out. When you come back to you partner, and suddenly you have lost all of that ability to go into your emotions, and express them, and make that emotional connection.

MATT: But it was hard for us to come back together. It was just--

RHEA: Because I was more independent, Matt. You have said that a couple times.

MATT: Right. Rhea became truly more independent and a different person in her own right. And I don't think that was a negative thing.

JOHNSON: No, but when you come back, you have to shut all that down to fight, then you come back, Rhea has changed, and you are dealing with all of this change and shift and coming back from war, right?

MATT: Mm-hmm. **JOHNSON:** Guys, I want to tell you, okay? That's a huge thing and there are so many people struggling with that. It's huge, all right? It's almost like, it sounds like a funny thing to say--I want to tell you you have the right to be stuck right now. Because it is a huge thing to deal with, right? And you are dealing with it. You are talking to me really openly. You are trying to look at your relationship. You are coming and talking to Joshua.

COMMENTARY: Here I am normalizing and validating to create safety and hope.

JOHNSON: You are saying, "Sue, I'm overwhelmed. We get caught in this dreadful battle. Somehow it feels like I don't have my copilot anymore. Feels like maybe I have already lost her. I don't know how to fix it. I'm overwhelmed. This is a different kind of danger. I knew, maybe, how to deal--I knew how to fly my helicopter. I knew how to deal with danger on one level, which was to put my feelings aside and just do it, right? This one is a different kind of danger. I don't know how to fly out of this. I don't know how to fly out of this, and it is just overwhelming for me and I get scared. So then I shut down, or I get mad."

MATT: Mm-hmm. COMMENTARY: In attachment terms the danger is literal. For the mammalian brain, this sense of disconnection and loss is a danger cue. So I am using it as a metaphor. I'm using it to refer to his fear, but for me it is also literal. I see him dealing with danger, and freaking out, not knowing how to deal with it.

JOHNSON: I hear you, Matt. I hear you. That's really hard.

MATT: Because being a pilot and moments of hesitation can cause cataclysmic results. So I try not to have those moments of hesitation in our lives, you know, in our relationship. Does that make sense? Because I don't want it to get cataclysmically worse. But actually the opposite is happening. It is getting cataclysmically reversed. Because what I do is I just land the helicopter. Instead of continuing to press on, I just land and go, "I'm shutting it down."

JOHNSON: "I'm going to land and shut down, or I'm going to go into emergency mode and get mad." But mostly you say, "I'm going to land and shut the helicopter down."

MATT: Yeah, because then--

JOHNSON: And then she says, "Where are you? I don't even matter to you. I can't even find you--you're gone."

RHEA: It seems like he is not hearing me at all. He doesn't go away and just go, "You know what--" Because I have said a couple of times, "Can you just listen to what--I just want to say something. Can you just maybe think about it?" And he used to. And I'm not saying that he is completely--I know that I do things wrong. But I'm just saying that the last couple of times I have said, "Can you--" I've walked away. And I have been frustrated, whether or not it is right or wrong is not the point. The point is that I have come back and I've said, "Here's how I feel. Can you just listen and maybe just think about it?"

But he doesn't. He reacts.

JOHNSON: No, well, it's--

MATT: The dance starts. And I don't want to just suppress. I want to react and react and react and--

JOHNSON: As we go on here in this therapy, you guys are going to--I'm going to tell you what's happening with other couples. You guys are going to understand this dance more and you are going to understand what it is all about, and you are going to see the steps, and you are going to see at this moment that this dance you are caught in is the enemy. Because it leaves you both hurting and terrified and alone.

And you are going to be able to do what other couples have done and start to say, "Hey we are caught in it again. Here comes the clash. Let's slow down here. Is this one of these moments when you start feeling overwhelmed? Is this one of these moments when you start feeling like I don't care?" And you are going to be able to say, "We are caught in it. Let's see if we can stop it here. How can we just comfort each other a bit? Let's start right now." You can do silly things. I have one couple who always make cocoa. "Let's make cocoa and then we are going to go back and we are going to take this to Joshua."

And you are going to start to learn how to slow this dance down that freaks you both out. Take more control. Create some safety in your relationship. And then Joshua is going to help you learn how to reach for each other again and create more safety and trust, so you can have your copilot again, and this lady can have the man that she is longing for and that she needs to reassure her that he loves her, yeah?

COMMENTARY: This is a classic EFT reframe as the dance, the negative cycle of disconnection, as the enemy, and also giving them an image, a model, of how they can start to take control of it and how other people have taken control of it.

You can have that again. But do you know what, guys? It's hard work. It's hard work, and I don't know how to do it without you guys being willing to struggle here the way you are with me, and feel some of these hard feelings. It's hard work. It's not easy, okay? But you can do it, all right?

I want to go back. What happens to you when this man says, "Yeah, Rhea, when you ask me for that reassurance, somehow I am paralyzed. I am stuck. I can't do it. I'm desperately trying to land the helicopter and shut down or I am somehow getting in fix-it fight mode and I can't respond. I'm overwhelmed"? What happens to you when he says, "I'm overwhelmed"? What happens to you? Right here, right now.

RHEA: I wonder what it is that I'm not doing for him that he thinks it's okay to say, "But what's somebody doing, what kind of work is somebody doing for me?" Because I think in our everyday life that I am, and I try, and I do my part and I am working on a non-emotional--

JOHNSON: I'm going to slow you down, okay? I'm going to slow you down. I'm hearing you say, "Sue, I go into all of these thoughts in my head about, 'Well, am I not taking care of him? What happens? Am I not somehow being there for him? Am I doing it wrong?'"

But I want to slow you down a bit because what I need to know is what happens for you emotionally? You asked a very good question. It's like you were saying, "How come you can't respond when I say where are you, where are you?" It's pretty hard because you guys are still hurting from the fight. I mean, I understand that. But given that, you are saying to him, "How come you can't respond when I need so much to know that you still love me?" Right?

And he is saying, "Well, what's happening is I'm drowning here. I'm overwhelmed. So I'm desperately trying to land the helicopter. I'm overwhelmed." Emotionally how do you feel when he says that? What happens for you just emotionally, Rhea? I know you have lots of thoughts and it is interesting to me that the thoughts you had were all about taking care of him. "Am I not--"

RHEA: Because he said that he doesn't feel like, "Well, who is doing this for me?" And I think, I don't understand what that means. I'm working--

JOHNSON: "Aren't I caring for you?" You are going to thoughts of "Aren't I caring for you?"

COMMENTARY: I'm trying to keep her in the moment. I'm trying to get her response to him talking about what gets in the way of him responding, because a key moment in this relationship is when she calls for him to reassure her, and he cannot respond to her cue. So I am going back there, refocusing, but I want her to stay with her emotional response and not go off into ideas in her head. I want her to stay focused on this key moment of what gets in the way of him responding to her.

RHEA: Because, again, there's this whole other thing that we just don't even get to talk about, or he can't do it so he doesn't have that to give me. And I'm still operating and giving our life what I can, operating on that whole thing not being part of it. And Matt knows that I am that person, and I like that and I need that. And I have lowered my standards and expectations because he is who he is, and I know that after all of these years. I know that sometimes I ask for too much. So I wonder, "How dare you, how can you possibly say that when there is this whole other thing?"

JOHNSON: So hang on. I'm going to slow you down because you are saying a lot, all right? You help me, all right? I say, what happens to you when he says he is overwhelmed? And I think what you are saying to him is, "I don't know quite how to respond to that. I feel confused and I feel upset because--"

RHEA: I want to throw in the bullshit flag, quite frankly.

JOHNSON: "Don't you know that I need you, and don't you know all I am asking is just for some reassurance? And I'm confused and somehow I'm frustrated with you." Is that what's happening when he says that? You help me. Am I getting it, Rhea?

RHEA: Yes.

JOHNSON: "I'm frustrated because you know me--"

RHEA: How can I be this hard to love? Why am I this hard to love? Why is it not verbally, not physically, not intimately? Not in any way. How can I be this hard to love and to be with? And why are you still with me, then, if you have nothing for me, not verbally, or emotionally or physically? Why then?

JOHNSON: I want to slow you down, okay? Can you hear me? I want to slow you down, just let you breathe for a minute, all right? Because I think--you help me--it's like this is the panic you are going through, yeah? You are going to this panic, that "Am I really so hard to love?"

RHEA: What do you have for me, then? What do you have? Because you working is very good and I do appreciate that, but that cannot be my life. It cannot be okay for me to just go, "Okay, that's fine."

JOHNSON: Okay, so I'm going to slow you down, all right?

COMMENTARY: I'm reflecting her emotion, trying to help her contain her emotion, responding to her hurt. What you see is her panic here, her attachment panic that he cannot respond to her. And so she cannot hear. I'm trying to help her tolerate what is getting in the way of listening to him. He is telling her where he is stuck. And it is so hard for her to hear. It's so hard for her to stay and tolerate that. Her own panic comes up, so I try to contain it.

RHEA: Yeah.

JOHNSON: Matt, I think your lady needs an answer, so I am going to try and answer her just on one level, and will you please correct me? Because you are the one that really knows.

My sense is it has nothing to do with you being hard to love. My sense is, what I am hearing your husband say, that you matter so much to him that when he hears he has disappointed you, and you get into this dreadful battle, and he feels like he is in danger, a different kind of danger, but just like he was in war, and that he is losing you and he has disappointed you--that he is overwhelmed, and all he is trying to do is land the helicopter. And he is numbing out. He is either in fight or flight.

And in that fight or flight mode, he can hardly hear you. And all he hears is he has disappointed you. And in that moment he doesn't--he is just overwhelmed in that moment. He doesn't know how to turn and say to the most important person in his life, "You're right, Rhea. We are caught in this terrible fight. And you are right, we are caught in it, but on another level you matter to me so much. You are my copilot and we are going to find a way back to each other."

Because, listen to my voice. For me to be able to say that to you, I've got to be able to turn and look at you and hear what you are saying, and go to this calm place in me where I say, "You are right, Rhea." I've got to be able to take it in.

What I'm hearing is that in that moment--you please help me, Matt--in that moment he is in "Every minute counts, I'm dying here, this is danger, I'm losing this woman, I'm blowing it, I can't fix it, I'm freaking out. I've got to land the helicopter or I've got to fight." Is that okay for you?

MATT: It's totally okay. That's correct. That's correct. And I hear Rhea's own frustration. I hear--it's untrue. It's not--what she's saying is not true.

COMMENTARY: I have just gone in and distilled, tried to distill the essence of what happens to him, all the underlying panic and ways of dealing with it that undermines his ability to respond to her. And it sounds like I've got it right. He's agreeing with me. This is important for her to hear. She starts to understand then that it is not about the fact that he doesn't love her. It's about all this panic and how he deals with it.

MATT: I do love her. I do--

JOHNSON: Can you tell her that directly?

MATT: I do love you. It's not true what you are saying. I just, I want you to believe that I don't know what to do.

RHEA: Then how come you can't come to me later and just say that? Even if you fight me. And even if we fight, you just never come to me anymore, and I can say never. You don't come to me and say--

MATT: Because it starts again. Because it starts again. It starts the dance again.

JOHNSON: Rhea, I've got to slow you down. Rhea, I know this--

RHEA: I'm never right, though. I never get any, "I shouldn't have said that, Rhea." I never get that.

JOHNSON: I hear you. But right now--

RHEA: That would be okay later.

JOHNSON: I want you to stay with what just happened. You asked him a question. He answered it.

RHEA: I hear that you love me, and I want to believe you, but I don't feel that.

JOHNSON: Okay.

RHEA: I know that you work hard, but I don't feel that you love me on any level other than I am just kind of here. And you don't want to have another divorce.

JOHNSON: Hey, yoo-hoo. **MATT:** I'm treading water.

JOHNSON: I'm parachuting in. Will you try a different message for me?

RHEA: Yes.

JOHNSON: "Matt, I'm so afraid you don't love me. I'm so afraid you don't love me. I hear you on one level, but my fear is so huge that you really don't love me that it is just so hard for me to hear it right now, even though right now you are trying to reach for me and do just what I said, which was to reassure me. Even though right now you are trying to reassure me, I'm like you--I'm overwhelmed, I'm afraid. So it is hard for me to hear." Is that all right?

RHEA: Yes.

MATT: Yeah. I don't know how to come back to you and say afterwards. This is how--if I knew how to do that then I would do that. If I knew how to do that I would do that.

RHEA: We used to do that better. Both of us.

JOHNSON: You guys are going to be able to do it again.

MATT: "Used to" is exactly the problem.

JOHNSON: I want you to hear what he said, Rhea, because what he said--Rhea, are you with me? I want you to really taste what he said. He said, "It's not that I don't love you, Rhea, or that you are hard to love. It's that in that moment when I am overwhelmed, I just--I don't"--that was my word, Matt. Maybe "paralyzed" is not the right word. "I'm just so caught with landing the helicopter. I'm so panicked"--that was my word, too. You help me if I'm--"I'm just on such emergency mode that I am caught in that and I just don't know what to do in that moment. I'm caught. I'm paralyzed."

RHEA: It feels like that--

MATT: Well--

RHEA: I'm sorry.

MATT: We called it an Immediate Action Item in the helicopter. I'm so ingrained and trained that you just switch to that Immediate Action Item. It doesn't take conscious thought. It just happens.

JOHNSON: I hear you.

RHEA: And that's--

MATT: Twist it back on. Restart the engine. Make sure the gear is down.

JOHNSON: I hear you. And I just want to say something here, okay? I'm going to change modes slightly--please forgive me. I hear you. And what I want to say to you is every vet that I have ever worked with, is that I hear you, and the way I understand that is for you to survive in those situations, you trained your brain. You trained your brain. And that is an incredibly beautiful phrase. Immediate Action Item. You trained your brain to respond to emergency and danger in a particular way and unfortunately, Matt, when you come home stateside, you can't just turn that off, yeah?

MATT: Yeah.

JOHNSON: That's right. You can't just turn that off. So when you hear that this lady is disappointed in you, and you say, "Oh my god, we are going to get into that war, that clash of the titans again, and I don't know how to fix it. And maybe I am going to lose the only real copilot I've ever had," that is danger.

And your brain goes into Immediate Action Item. And there are only two things--land the damned helicopter and go into the cave or fight like hell. And you are in action mode. So then she turns and says, "How come you can't tell me you love me?" and it is like she is talking about being at the bottom of the mountain. You are fighting for your life on the top. You are in a whole different place.

MATT: Yeah. Yeah. Totally.

JOHNSON: And you don't know how to do it. But the irony is, actually, it is dangerous because she matters so much to you. If she didn't matter to you, you wouldn't be in Immediate Action Item, would you?

MATT: Right.

JOHNSON: I hear you.

COMMENTARY: Once again I use the reframe, that the issue is he loves her so much. That is why he goes into a panic. And the panic sparks the action tendencies to shut down or to fight, and blocks his ability to stay open and close to her. But once again, I use that reframe. It's important.

JOHNSON: So you get stuck in a panic. "My goodness, this man can't respond to me right now. Maybe he really doesn't love me. Maybe I'm even hard to love. Maybe he doesn't love me, he's so shut down." And you get angry and try and reach him. You hear she is disappointed in you. You go into shutting down or fighting back. But what's happening for you here is that you are overwhelmed with all of this. You are overwhelmed and you go into Immediate Action Item. And that is usually emotional shutdown.

And if I am in emotional shutdown, then you say to me, "Hey Sue, can you find your feelings of love for me?" I'm like, "Um, no. I'm dancing a waltz. Sorry, I don't know how to shift to polka. I'm, I'm--What? I'm busy landing the helicopter." You are in fight or freeze, yes? That's what's happening for you?

MATT: Yeah.

JOHNSON: But what I'm hearing is, right here, right now, when we are talking about this and I am helping you put it together, you can turn to your lady and say, "You know what, Rhea, I do love you. And I don't want to lose my copilot. I'm just caught in this dreadful place. By the time that we get to this place where you say, 'How come you just can't reach for me?' I'm caught in Immediate Action Item. I'm overwhelmed. And I don't know what to do."

MATT: But I don't think Rhea believes in this place. I think she thinks it is an excuse.

JOHNSON: Okay, hang on. Let's just stay here for a minute because we covered a lot of ground. I want to be here for this. Have I got it right?

MATT: Yes. Yeah, it's spot on for me.

JOHNSON: So can you tell her? Because it is different coming from me. Can you tell her? "Rhea, I hear that you need that reassurance but in that moment I am caught in Immediate Action Item and I don't know what to do. I'm overwhelmed." Can you tell her that?

MATT: I hear that you need me, but I'm caught in this cycle that I can't break out of. I don't know what to do. I used to know what to do for us and with us, but it is different now. It's just--

JOHNSON: I'm overwhelmed.

MATT: I'm overwhelmed. It's not just us. It's everything in my life. And I'm overwhelmed. And I don't know what to do.

COMMENTARY: What he is saying very clearly is, "My PTSD symptoms, the echoes of war, and what I had to do to survive in war is now getting in the way of my ability to be open and accessible to you." This happens a lot after deployment.

JOHNSON: "And I'm so scared in that moment that I'm going to lose you." That's the bit that I think maybe is important.

MATT: I'm scared I am going to lose you. It's not just because of another divorce. It's because of our relationship. I love you. We have been through a tremendous amount of things together, but can't I not know?

RHEA: Yes, I hear you. I just don't know why then you pick on me. Why do you pick on me?

MATT: It's a defensive mechanism. My anger is the way, is a different way. It's either this or that.

RHEA: Okay.

JOHNSON: You guys, I'm going to slow you down. You guys are working so hard. I feel very honored that you let me in the way that you are letting me in, all right? Do you hear him?

RHEA: I do hear him. I would like to know why you already have set me up to doubt you about this.

JOHNSON: No, no, no, no. He hasn't set you up. You guys have got--

MATT: That's just my opinion.

RHEA: He doesn't trust me.

JOHNSON: You guys have got caught up in this dreadful pattern.

RHEA: He doesn't trust me. He said he doesn't think I believe that.

MATT: I trust you. I don't--

JOHNSON: I need you to slow down for me, okay, Rhea? I need you to slow down for me, okay? Do you hear him?

RHEA: I do hear him.

JOHNSON: Okay, you hear him. He's saying, this isn't about not loving you. Actually it is about needing you so much because "I'm scared to lose my copilot." This is about the "I'm totally caught in Immediate Action Item. I'm totally caught in land the helicopter, shut down, or fight. And so I don't know how to turn or reassure you because I'm all caught up in my own fear."

And then you get into fear, as well. You say, "I don't feel important to you. How come you can't reassure me?" And now what comes up for you is, "And also when we are caught in this dreadful pattern, it feels to me like you talk to me like the enemy."

RHEA: Totally.

JOHNSON: Yeah.

RHEA: Like I'm stupid and I don't know what I'm doing. And he doesn't trust me in a general sense. Doesn't trust me to do the right thing.

JOHNSON: Right. So now what you are saying to him is, "Right, and sometimes it's almost like you act like I'm the enemy."

COMMENTARY: This is a classic event in the process of disconnection and insecurity. When he does turn and try to start to become open and responsive to her, talk about his emotions, she can't hear him because she is caught in her own hurt and her own fear. So I have to slow down and help her start to hear him.

JOHNSON: "And that hurts." Yeah?

RHEA: Because I've been here for 18 years, through a lot of different things.

JOHNSON: And my sense is you would like him to turn to you as the copilot. You would like to be able to support him to deal with all of this stuff, this Immediate Action Item. We all need someone. We all need someone to reach for when we go into Immediate Action Item. We all need a copilot. And we all get scared when we feel like our copilot is suddenly not going to be there, yeah?

MATT: But we also need an aircraft commander. You need somebody to make the really hard decisions and your copilot to do it unconditionally.

JOHNSON: That's tricky in marriage.

RHEA: Yes it is.

MATT: Exactly. And that's a struggle for me, too. When I was in the situation where I couldn't land the helicopter and we had to press on headfirst into that danger, and my copilot was not doing well, was buffering the situation, I had to tell them exactly what is going to happen and I will get you through this.

JOHNSON: I understand. So--

MATT: But what happens now is my copilot doesn't just let me get us through it. It's a fight.

JOHNSON: But listen to what you are saying. I want you to listen to what you are saying.

MATT: Mm-hmm. JOHNSON: What I am hearing you say is, "Sue, when I am trying to take over, when I am trying to take over this whole thing, it's because I am trying to be the commander. I'm trying to get us through the danger." I hear you. And I believe you, because I have heard that before from so many military. The tricky part is that when you are trying to take over and sort of giving orders, it works. She feels put down. And that leads back into the pattern.

RHEA: Totally.

MATT: But I don't mean it that way.

JOHNSON: No, I understand you and I believe you. You are just trying to take control and get through the fight. Guys, I want you to look at what we have just done in this brief little period of time. All right? Because we have done a huge amount of work here in this. I don't know how long we have been talking--an hour and a quarter. All right.

An hour and a quarter. You guys are awesome. All right? Look what we have just done.

You have been through so much, all these transitions, all these difficult times. Going to war derails so many families, so many couples, right? It's hard to go. It's hard to come back. It's hard to change your battle mind. It's hard to get out of Immediate Action Item. Your brain has learned certain things. You don't just switch those off, right?

So you are dealing with all of this. But you come in here and in just the last 75 minutes we have talked about your--and obviously you have worked with Joshua, which is great. You are going to keep working with him. We have outlined this dance that picks you up and freaks you both out, this clash of titans. The more you understand it, the more you get it, the more you get this dance is the enemy and you can handle it, you can hold hands--maybe not by having a commander, but by just holding hands and saying, "We are caught in this thing."

And you take risks with each other. You have told each other about your deep emotions here. You have risked. Matt, you haven't just landed the helicopter in this session. You have come out and told this lady your feelings. You have been very honest. You are saying, "I get stuck. I get stuck in that moment and I don't know how to respond, because my brain is caught somewhere else."

Your lady has come out and told you what she really needs. You guys have done a lot of incredible work here. If you can do this with me, in these 75 minutes, you can take control of this pattern and you can learn how to create that trust together again. Yeah? You are doing great. Can you hear me?

MATT: I hear you. I hear you. It doesn't feel like it, but I hear you.

JOHNSON: I hope you see the risks that you have both taken. I hope you guys are both feeling good about the risks you have taken here. You have taken some incredible risks. It takes a lot of courage to do that. You don't do that if you don't really care about the other person.

RHEA: That's true.

MATT: That's a good way to put it.

JOHNSON: I think what we need to do now is we need to stop, take care of you guys a little bit. Joshua is going to maybe take you for a little walk, get you some tea, get you some coffee, just maybe take you for a walk for ten minutes. I'm going to go in there. We are going to talk to all those therapists. I'm going to get you some feedback so that you know the impact you have had on all those people. I'm going to get you some feedback from there. I'm going to come in and I'm going to give you the feedback for just a few minutes more. Are you all right?

MATT: Yeah, that's--

JOHNSON: You guys okay?

RHEA: What?

MATT: I'd like to hear things. I always told Josh, I hate to end when we are digging in the trenches. I need to have something--

RHEA: We don't really have what to do next.

MATT: --uplifting to end on.

RHEA: Like what to do next.

JOHNSON: Well, you know what, guys? This is part of something that we have done lots and lots of times. So I want you to let us be the commander sometimes in this relationship battle. Is that all right? Okay?

Okay, so let's stop for minute and Joshua is going to take care of you. It's 11 o'clock. I'm going to go in there 'til about 10 past and I'm going to come in here, give you some feedback for a few minutes.

MATT: Okay.

JOHNSON: You all right?

RHEA: Yes.

JOHNSON: Okay, good.

JOHNSON: Now we are going to see me going back into the session and giving this couple the feedback from the people that have watched in the EFT externship. This is important. It is a chance to reassure the couple and to reinforce the messages that came out in the session. It is important for the couple to know how the people in the room that were watching them were responding. And we tried to say things that will help the therapy develop in the next few sessions.

JOHNSON: People had all kinds of feedback for you. What they wanted you to know was that they were amazingly moved and amazingly touched and amazingly honored that you would be willing to be open and to show your feelings and to include them in this, and that they were just blown away by you. They were blown away by your courage, and that they were just amazingly touched that you would work here with me and that they were able to be part of this.

So, most of what people--that was a lot of what people said, and that they just wanted to thank you and that they feel very honored that you would do that. So that is an important message.

RHEA: Thank you.

JOHNSON: They also felt that there were some places that really, really moved them. I guess they felt that what they saw was that they saw how strong you both are, and how they felt that you would be a wonderful team of copilots, and that you can get back there.

They had all kinds of hope for our guys. They felt like if you could come in here and do this with me, and you were willing to face such difficult feelings, and still stay here and struggle with those feelings, it was very clear to them--somebody put it very beautifully.

It was very clear to them that you desperately need to know that this man loves you even though you are going through all of these hard times and getting caught in this clash of titans. And that it was very clear to everyone that you desperately love her and that is why you get Immediate Action Item when you hear that she is angry with you and disappointed, and you don't know what to do. And so people really saw how much you loved each other and that you are willing to work and fight for this relationship. So they had all kinds of hope. They felt like your love for each other was really tangible.

RHEA: That's good to hear.

MATT: Mm-hmm. That's good.

JOHNSON: The other--I'm thinking of all of these things. Oh, and they also heard how you could miss each other in this dance. One lady said, "I really hear that for Rhea, somehow it seems really simple that what she is saying to her husband is, 'So I am feeling like I'm in free-fall here. I'm so upset. Just reassure me you love me.' And it seems so simple." And that she was really hearing that for you it seems so simple and yet for you at that moment, you are in Immediate Action Item. You are in flight or freeze or fight. And it is like a voice coming in from some other country, and you are not even in the place where you can touch those feelings of love. You are in panic mode. So people were saying they really see how you miss each other. How one person is dancing the waltz, the other person is dancing a tango. You just sort of miss each other. And then you both hurt. Right? So that made sense to people.

MATT: I haven't done the phrase that we use that might help that. We say Aviate, Navigate and Communicate, in that order. You always do it in that order when you are in distress.

RHEA: So communicate is last.

MATT: To communicate is last. It's Aviate, keep flying. Keep the ship upright. Keep the blue side up.

JOHNSON: I hear you.

RHEA: You get the analogy award.

MATT: That's what happens for me.

JOHNSON: You have amazing--

RHEA: Metaphor.

JOHNSON: You have amazing metaphors.

RHEA: We hear that a lot.

JOHNSON: Listen, honestly, I'm not kidding.

MATT: I charge for these, by the way.

JOHNSON: Do you? Jolly good.

MATT: So, afterwards, we can settle that up later.

JOHNSON: Well, I hear you. So, you Aviate, Navigate, and then your mind goes into Communication. And so there she is, standing there saying, "Just say this to me," and for you that is like you have to turn yourself into a pretzel at that moment.

MATT: Right.

JOHNSON: But sitting here--

MATT: Aviating.

JOHNSON: --sitting here, where you are calmer, you can turn and say, "I do love you. This isn't anything about you being hard to love. This is how caught we are in this pattern, and the difficult time I am having with my feelings, and how we are missing each other."

MATT: Yeah.

JOHNSON: The other thing that people said was that even when I was talking to you, and I'm a stranger, I was talking to you and you were dealing with all of these difficult feelings. They felt that, yes, you were caught up in them, but that actually what they felt was that you would still check in with her--that they could see you glancing at her and they still felt like you were actually keeping your connection with her, even when you were caught up in those feelings. So people commented on that. I'm trying to think of what these other things are. Oh, people just wanted to validate how much they hear that you love this man and that you long for his reassurance, and how hard it is for you to understand when he goes into shutdown or fight. How hard it is for you.

RHEA: Thank you.

JOHNSON: And that when he--and it really made sense to me when you said, "When I'm starting to take control, and she feels criticized, I'm into commander mode because I'm in alarm." So people really felt like we were able to make lots of sense of stuff here, to understand what is going on with you. And understanding what is going on and outlining it is the first step to being able to have some control over it, so that the clash doesn't just happen. It doesn't take you over. It doesn't push you over into that hopeless place anymore. And you can start to learn how to come out and reach for each other.

What was the session like for you guys? Was it what you expected?

RHEA: I was--

MATT: I didn't know what to expect, really. It is like going into it cold. You're right. I don't know you, but--

RHEA: We trust Josh, I think.

MATT: We trust Josh and--

RHEA: He said bringing you in would be a good positive thing. It couldn't hurt. It really couldn't hurt.

MATT: Anything to help. It's one more tool in the toolkit to help. That's what I was hoping to get out of it. Very enlightening. I was telling Josh, and I didn't really think about the copilot thing just 'til right now. Just 'til today, actually.

I know I need that. And I actually don't have that in my professional career anymore. It's a single pilot helicopter, and so I really don't have that anymore either. So I have to deal with that as well. So it is just very helpful.

RHEA: I feel, hearing that, I always thought that I was. I thought I still was. I always thought I was the one person he could talk to and trusted. And I just--

JOHNSON: You are. He's just lost the ability to turn and reach for you, right? He wants you back. He doesn't know what to do when he feels like he is losing you. That's the panic he gets.

RHEA: I guess what I just am realizing is that what I struggle with is how I lost that job. And I'm not sure how I ended up not still being that person. I don't know what I did.

JOHNSON: I'm not sure you did anything, Rhea.

RHEA: I know. I hear that. But I just--

JOHNSON: I think what happened is--he went for--One thing that happened is he went to war. And that changes everything.

RHEA: But even in the last seven years when things were like "regular" and "normal"--

JOHNSON: So what I'm hearing is you want that back, that sense of being his copilot.

RHEA: I feel like I lost it and I don't know why. And I don't--

JOHNSON: Well, I think you both lost it. You both lost it because you got caught up in this pattern. And you got caught up in--your mind got trained to deal with danger and alarm in a certain way, right? So it makes sense to me that you lost touch with it. I don't think it is gone. You guys are in here fighting for your relationship, okay? But I am hearing how much you are saying to him, "I want to be your copilot. And I want you to turn to me and we can fly through this danger together. We can fly through this danger together and come out the other side. And when we do, our relationship is going to be stronger than ever."

That's what I see for your guys.

RHEA: The other thing I think I got, too, is that there are some things that Matthew says here in our sessions that I just think, "God, I never knew that." And I get it. And when Matt says he doesn't think I believe that, I can understand that because it has never come up. So I act one way because I am operating on this and then he is feeling this. And if I don't know this then how can I possibly seem like I believe him?

JOHNSON: That's right. And what we do, in a way, what Joshua is doing and what I'm doing is we have a kind of map for this dangerous area. And what we do is we create some safety for you and a guide, so that you can start to learn about what's going on with your husband, he can start to learn about what is going on with you. And you can help each other out of this clash of titans and into a safe place. That's what we are trying to do here. So I feel like you guys did a stellar piece of work here.

RHEA: Thank you.

JOHNSON: And I feel like if you can do that with me, me just parachuting in here, you keep working with Josh, you are going to be fine. But it's hard.

MATT: Mm-hmm. **JOHNSON:** There's lots of really raw feelings here, and you both get hurt and you both get scared. Right?

MATT: Right.

JOHNSON: And, you know, I think sometimes it kind of helps in our relationships when we are getting hurt and scared, when we suddenly have this flash of, "Oh, well, if I'm getting hurt and scared, probably my partner is getting hurt and scared as well. So actually we are both hurt and scared."

RHEA: I really don't think of Matt that way. So yes, it is good to see and hear that. And the only other thing I was going to just say was that it is good to hear some things--I know that I need to listen. Sometimes I need to listen better when Matt is saying something.

JOHNSON: Well, it's hard to listen when we have all of these difficult feelings, just like it is hard to respond in the way our partner wants when we are desperately trying to deal with all of these difficult feelings. Yeah?

RHEA: Yes. And then also for me, makes me feel better when Matt says some things like about being the commander and how he wishes, I'm just supposed to listen. And you say one thing, and it is kind of what I have been saying. That makes me feel a little bit better, too. Just sometimes I think maybe he is right. Maybe I should just listen. But that's not my nature. So it is good to hear just different things, not that he is wrong and I'm right and all of that. It's just--

JOHNSON: I think it's going to go that you guys are going to be able to help both take command at times and help each other out of this difficult place. But also, you know, he went off to war. You stayed behind. And you had to focus on your own strength and learn to be strong just in yourself, right?

RHEA: I did. And I had a lot going on, and I was also his only support out there.

JOHNSON: That's right. And so there is also a huge readjustment when you came back to being--it's like you are used to flying your helicopter by yourself, suddenly you do have a copilot. Even that is an adjustment for people. That's a hard one, right?

MATT: Mm-hmm. **RHEA:** And when Matt said, "You changed after I got back," and I take that as like, "I'm not as docile, or what? Isn't that like a good thing?" "You're amazing, you made it"--that's what I want to hear. And not necessarily that Matt is saying it in a negative way, but again I'm looking for something like, "You're amazing."

JOHNSON: You want that. And we all need that from our copilot.

MATT: Mm-hmm. RHEA: I don't think Matt doesn't think that. I do think it is nice to hear sometimes.

MATT: I do hear that, but it is hard to give that when you want that, too. So when you are wanting that, it is hard to give that as well. That's the best way I can describe that.

JOHNSON: And maybe you can talk about that with Joshua. Because if somehow--I had one couple say to me, one man said to me once, "Well, if she has to ask me for it, if he is demanding it, it means I have already failed and she is disappointed in me because I haven't given it to her. And I get caught up in the fact that I have already failed and disappointed her. And then I freeze, and then I can't turn around and tell her."

MATT: Right.

RHEA: But I'm so forgiving. I feel like I am so forgiving. I will take--

JOHNSON: No, but this isn't about you forgiving, this is about Matt being about to deal with his feelings differently, okay?

RHEA: Okay.

JOHNSON: But I don't know if it resonated with you, what I just said.

MATT: That's very true. No, it's very true.

JOHNSON: But I think maybe to work with that with Joshua. Because I think that's what I'm hearing.

MATT: Mm-hmm. JOHNSON: You go into this failure place, and in this helpless failure place you're already just trying to land the helicopter. Well, if I say to you, "Excuse me, Matt, I know you are trying to land the helicopter and it is a dangerous storm right now, but would you please try to give me some love?" you say, "Excuse me, I'm going to land."

MATT: I'm task-saturated right now.

JOHNSON: So you guys miss each other.

MATT: Mm-hmm. JOHNSON: So, guys, I know that you have to go. I just want to say that I really appreciate you, and that it has been a really rich experience for me to work with you. And I want to thank you very much for letting me in. That's a real honor for me. And I really respect your struggle. And my sense is if you keep working with Joshua, you will be just fine. And if it's okay with you, I would really like to know how you are. And I would like to be able for Joshua to share what is happening with you with me. And if I can help by giving him support, I'd like to be able to do that, if that's okay, if I have your permission to do that.

RHEA: Yes.

MATT: That would be great, yeah. Appreciate that.

JOHNSON: I'd like to know how you are. And I'm also going to send you a copy of Hold Me Tight.

RHEA: Oh, great.

MATT: Okay. Thank you.

RHEA: Thank you very much.

MATT: Thank you.

JOHNSON: I want you to read it. I think it will help.

MATT: All right.

RHEA: Thank you very much.

JOHNSON: You are very, very welcome.

MATT: Thank you.

JOHNSON: Thank you for coming.

MATT: Thank you so much. Appreciate it.

JOHNSON: Keep fighting for your relationship.

MATT: Thank you.

YALOM: That was really quite a journey, both seeing the consultation and then seeing the session which you did, which I must say was a real masterful piece of work.

JOHNSON: It was a good session.

YALOM: Yeah.

JOHNSON: I thought it was good in that we basically did classic EFT--outlining the cycle, and helping the couple with their very difficult emotions that threaten to overwhelm them. But we were able to stay there and help them unpack them and get to their underlying feelings. I think it was a very good session. It was very positive.

YALOM: Now, again, going into it we saw in the consultation that they had just erupted in the previous session.

JOHNSON: Yes.

YALOM: And you got the sense that that potential to erupt was always there. Now you did a lot of work right from the beginning to summarize, to really slow down--

JOHNSON: To contain.

YALOM: Always reaching over to her.

JOHNSON: To soothe and contain.

YALOM: Soothing.

JOHNSON: Yeah.

YALOM: You did a great job, but one had the sense that it could have erupted at any time.

JOHNSON: Yes. And what I did was slow things down and refocus. Focus on the process. Use empathy, because being listened to calms people down. But you are right, I had to do that a lot. And you really had the sense of the press of her anxiety--that it was so hard for her, even when he did start to respond to her, it was hard for her to hear what he was saying. And she would say, "Yes, but I've got this other point."

So I felt like I used touch to try and slow her down and keep her with me. But, yes, it was hard work. And you can see how they can just spin out of control and then start to just trigger each other all over again. So that is hard work.

YALOM: But, so even though you did a lot of work to contain them, that didn't prevent you at all from actually doing a lot of work and going quite a bit of distance in a single session.

JOHNSON: Yes. And I think there the attachment frame and our work with emotions--I have a sense of what emotions are likely to be there, and I sort of know almost how to tune into the person's experience. That helps me a lot. And that is something you learn as an EFT therapist.

YALOM: Right. Now I know you were, as you said--a nice metaphor. This was full of metaphors, this session.

JOHNSON: Yes, it was.

YALOM: Some wonderful ones. But, as you said, you were parachuting in as a consulting therapist to do a session. And sometimes with that and with an audience and a camera, you are tempted to do even more. Do you think this was representative or typical of a session? Do you usually cover this much ground?

JOHNSON: If the couple will come with me, sure. I'll go as far as I can go. I was trying to do Step Two and Step Three, look at the cycle, go for underlying feelings. But I think the other issue here that is very important is we are seeing here the effect of PTSD symptoms on a relationship, and the effects of deployment on a relationship. So this couple need more support and more scaffolding because they are basically a couple that are dealing with trauma.

YALOM: Yeah.

JOHNSON: So you usually do need to give these couples more support. And therapy will usually take a little bit longer with these guys, just because they are caught in all of these dreadful emotions and they do trigger each other. And he said it himself. When he gets triggered he goes straight into emergency mode, right?

YALOM: Right.

JOHNSON: And it is interesting because from our point of view from a theoretical--

YALOM: Immediate Action Plan, as well.

JOHNSON: Yeah. And from our point of view, that is exactly what happens to people when they get into attachment panic. It is an emergency. The brain says, "This is a life-and-death situation." So you could really see it here. And he is into life-and-death, land the helicopter, go in the cave, or fight like hell. And she is saying, "Why can't you just come and dance with me at that moment?" Well, you can see how they miss each other, right? And then they just get caught in this dreadful place where they are alone.

YALOM: And you can see that repeating over and over again. No matter what he said, she would say, "Yes, but why don't you do this, or why don't you come back later and tell me you love me?"

JOHNSON: But I think basically by the end of the session, they'd really started to share some new emotions with each other.

YALOM: Yes.

JOHNSON: And my sense is they were starting to see how they were both caught in this negative pattern and they were both hurting. And they started to see each other differently. I think her worst fear--my hypothesis is her worst fear is, "He can't love me because there is something about me that is too difficult to love." That's what I heard. And I heard his worst fear is, "I'm incompetent, I'm failing here, I don't know what to do. And I've already lost this lady."

So if you think of those two things, we get into a panic when that's the message we are getting in the relationship. But what they are starting to do already in this session is deal with their panic differently with just a little bit of help from me.

YALOM: And one way you moved them along is you do a lot of speaking for them. You do it nicely because you always ask them, "Have I gotten it right?" But you push them along. You take a little risk of saying something that they haven't quite said.

JOHNSON: Yes. And in a way I have a freedom here because I am in as a consultant. I'm not sure--if I was the therapist, I might go slower. But I'm trying to give them as much as I can in this session. So I take the risk of going a little further and speaking for them. But in a sense it is easy for me to do, because attachment gives you a map to the emotions that are going on. And we have worked with so many couples who have dealt with trauma. So I have a sense of the territory.

And as long as you do it respectfully, people correct you when you have it wrong. But, yes, I try to create a coherent picture of their emotions when I can. And I was pleased when he said, I said, "Is that right for you?" and he says, "Yes, you've got it right. You've got it right." She needs to hear his story of his emotion. So I am trying to give her that. But you have to be careful because you also can't put words in people's mouths. If it is not really right and really relevant for them, they will push it away.

YALOM: Yeah, and a few times they did. They said, "No that's not right."

JOHNSON: Yes. I think at the beginning he said, "No, that's not right." And that's good.

YALOM: That's good. That gives you an indication that they are going to correct you.

JOHNSON: So sometimes you lead and sometimes you follow. You say, "I think it is like this." And you almost speak for them. And you use the first person. You speak as if it is them. And they hear and they resonate with it. And with him, I could tell from the expression on his face. It's interesting, he's a military man, he's had to be able to numb out. But actually, his emotions are all over his face when you reach for those underlying feelings. I was very touched by both of them. They are a beautiful couple and they are caught in a very narrow place. They are hurting. But they obviously love each other very much.

YALOM: Yeah, and you gave them a lot of positive reinforcements in the session and then in the feedback session at the end. You gave them a lot of encouragement.

JOHNSON: Yes. I think they will do fine.

YALOM: One thing I would like to ask, even though it looked like hard work--

JOHNSON: Yes.

YALOM: You make it a lot easier than I think other therapists would have with that. So, what I'm wondering, what do you think are the most difficult things for couples therapists--whether they are EFT-trained therapists or not--what are the most challenges of learning to be a good couples therapist in general, and with a high-conflict couple like this one?

JOHNSON: I think if you are going to be a good couples therapist and you are going to deal with this incredibly complex drama that moves all the time and has lots of different layers, you have to have a map. Now we have attachment theory, and I am pretty attached to that.

YALOM: Yes.

JOHNSON: But you have to have a map. You have to understand what's going on. Otherwise the therapist gets overwhelmed and the couple get over overwhelmed. But I think basically learning how to deal with and make sense of people's emotions. And learning how to create enactments where you can structure it that people get in touch with a new emotion and can send a new emotional signal to their partner. And then you can help the partner hear it. Because if you notice, it's hard for the other person even to just turn down their own emotions and hear the message.

And sometimes it brings up emotions in them that it's hard to tolerate. So this is work. But creating enactments. Knowing how to structure enactments so they are safe, so they are just taking little steps. Knowing how to deal with them when they go wrong. And knowing how to stay with people's emotions and help them distill those emotions, go down into their deeper emotions. Not just stay on the power struggle all the time. That's hard work. We are pretty good at training EFT therapists now, but it takes practice. It's like learning a dance. It's like learning tango. I dance tango. It's like learning tango. The first time you start doing tango it just feels really awkward and you can't put the music together with the figures and the steps, and you can't listen to your partner, and it all seems so difficult, and it's very awkward and you make mistakes.

But as you start to do it, you start to integrate all that. It's kind of like you get caught up in it, and you can improvise, and there is flow. But it takes time to learn to do that.

Couples therapy is hard. There's a lot going on. It's also amazingly rewarding. And if you can help couples create a more secure base, you don't only give them the chance for a lifetime bond--you strengthen them as individuals.

YALOM: Yeah, there is a lot of individual growth that can happen with couples therapy.

JOHNSON: Oh, securely attached people are less anxious, they are less depressed, they deal with stress better, they are healthier. It goes on and on. They are better parents. It goes on and on and on and on and on. So it is very rewarding, this work.

YALOM: Yeah. I can see it is something that you have been passionate about for a long time, and it seems like that excitement for you is not waning at all.

JOHNSON: No. And I guess I am persuaded more and more and more that the essence of good couples therapy is you have to be able to help people deal with their emotions, get to those core feelings, needs and fears, and deal with them positively. You have to be able to do that. And you have to go to the level of attachment. Because in the end, this conflict is all about attachment, all about our needs and fears and how we deal with them. And if you don't do that, you miss the boat.

You might be able to help somebody a little bit, teaching them how to negotiate things like chores. But this is the heart of the matter. And good couples therapy that is going to create lasting change, you've got to be able to go there. We have to be able to work with these emotions. We have to be able to help people have these positive bonding interactions. If we can do that, we can make the most amazing difference in people's lives. And that is amazing for the therapist, too.

YALOM: It's been a great pleasure spending this time with you today and learning more about couples therapy and EFT, and I want to thank you very much for being so generous.

JOHNSON: You're welcome. It's been fun.