

Module 7: Accessing the Self-Assertion Side (Empowerment Exercise)

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Goal of this module: Activate the need for self-assertion on an emotional level

Module 7 is complementary to Module 5. Here, the focus is on strengthening the need for autonomy and self-assertion in people who are in an anxious-avoidant Coping mode or in submission. The starting point is again the mode cycle—either one that occurs in session or one from the couple's everyday life. We first interrupt and then analyze the cycle while standing.

1. Identify the active emotion (behind the avoidant coping mode). The anxious-avoidant person is asked about the emotions (loneliness, fear, sadness, despair) that lie behind the distanced coping mode. If necessary, we offer: *“Is the feeling behind your withdrawal more tense-annoyed-angry, or more vulnerable-anxious-sad?”* This chair is placed behind the protector's chair (see Figure 5 in Module 4). *“Exactly—the protector is shielding Tom's vulnerable side. That works. The only problem is that Tom also has a self-assertion need. Remember that we are all born with two legs including a self-assertion side and the ability to be angry. The wall blocks that too. That's why you no longer feel that power of anger in you, or you don't dare to show it! Shall we try to access it together?”* Tom's protector chair is then turned away as in Module 5, and Tom sits on the chair for the vulnerable (BLUE) side, with us sitting next to him. In case you work online, ask Tom to sit in his “normal” chair, close the eyes and picture a protector wall in front of him.

2. Validate the “wall” and reframe it. *“What do you feel when you sit here behind your protective wall?”* Typically, patients feel protected. *“Exactly, for your vulnerable side the wall is a protective wall. But let's look ahead: Do you want to spend the rest of your life behind this wall? ... Perhaps, besides the vulnerable part of you, is there also a part that wants something different? ... Maybe connecting with other people?... For that part, the wall is a prison wall! What do you think about building a solid gate into this wall—like in a castle or a medieval city wall—guarded by your adult mode? Whenever you need protection, you close the gate. Whenever you want to try something, you can step outside. You don't lose your protection! You simply gain a second option and can choose.”*

Note: If the person has mixed or ambivalent feelings (e.g., sad-annoyed disappointment), we can still work in the way described, adding:

“Okay, it's good that you can now also feel your anger. Until now, it's been pretty well hidden behind the wall. Shall we try together to use this power of anger so you can stand up to Betty openly?”

Then we move directly to step 4. It's only important in step 5 to ensure that Tom also offers enough in return to make it worthwhile for Betty to engage with the new situation.

3. Accessing the self-assertion side – empowerment imagery

We ask Tom to stand up and close his eyes. We stand beside him—both in the position of the RED chair. Betty remains seated and also closes her eyes. (This is the only configuration in our work where the three of us are not on the same level. The purpose here is to deliberately make Tom “larger” than Betty—so-called power posing).

“Tom, can you imagine yourself growing to three meters tall? May I switch to ‘you’ as we work in imagery? Perhaps there’s a hero figure you admire. You can become that now. Or imagine you are a large, strong tree, deeply rooted in the earth that nothing can topple. Which image do you prefer? ... Now feel your strength in your body, right down into the ground ... Imagine that tonight a miracle happens, and tomorrow morning your relationship with Betty is exactly as you dream it to be. What would that look like? If anything were possible, what would you want to say to Betty? What would you want her to do, or what would you want to do with her?”

4. Expression of constructive self-assertion in the adult mode

Depending on the expressed wish, we now support Tom in stating this wish powerfully to Betty’s eyes—preferably while standing, with Betty remaining seated. All still with closed eyes. But since we are addressing the adult mode, we switch back to the formal “you”: *“How do you feel right down into your body now? Are you in touch with your wishes? Do you feel more strength when the two of us are bigger than Betty? ... We’ve just heard what your self-assertion side wants. Can you now say that to Betty directly, with more power? ... How does that feel, right down into your body?”*

5. Expression of a bond-oriented offer that facilitates the partner’s acceptance of self-assertive wishes

To make it easier for Betty to respond to Tom’s wishes—which may otherwise feel aversive to her—Tom’s self-assertive wishes should be linked with a bond-oriented offer. If Tom manages to express what we consider balanced wishes and offers, we can continue. Otherwise, we can propose constructive formulations to ensure the exercise ends well.

6. Establishing contact with the dominant (and possibly distanced) partner

Before moving to Betty’s side, we ask Tom to hold on to his current feeling and body sense. Sitting next to Betty, we then ask: *“Betty, you’ve listened. How does it feel—right down into your body—to hear Tom speak in this way? ... Can you accept it? ... What is your impulse?”*

Depending on Tom’s wishes and Betty’s response, several paths are possible:

- If Tom wants more autonomy and distance, and Betty reacts at least moderately cooperatively, the conditions for balancing closeness and distance can be negotiated in a “connection dialogue” (see Module 11).
- If Betty cannot or will not respond at all to Tom’s wishes, this is marked as “non-fit.” The outcome of therapy may then be a relationship arrangement (so-called living together apart or eventually a separation; see Module 13).
- In the most positive case, Betty is actually willing to respond to Tom’s wishes.

“Betty, I’ve heard that you understand Tom’s wishes. Can you imagine approaching him now?”

If Betty is ready to approach Tom, we can guide her (eyes still closed) to take Tom’s hand and move toward him—as far as feels right for them. They may simply stand facing each other and look into each other’s eyes (for this, we open eyes), hold hands, or even embrace (better with eyes closed). We tell the couple that we will turn away and close our eyes as well so that they don’t feel observed.

We can close this step with: *“Okay, there are certainly still some obstacles to overcome, but we can all three see that closeness is still possible, right?”*

7. Discrimination of feelings before and after the session

Both partners are asked—still standing—to notice and express their feelings before and after the session (see step 10 in Module 5). If the couple was able to meet each other with some goodwill, we can move on to the solution-oriented modules—i.e., joint imagery exercises (Module 9) and later connection dialogues (Module 11). If both partners cannot sufficiently shift to the bonding side, and if schema-driven blockages seem to play a role, individual sessions can be offered before resuming the solution-oriented modules. Otherwise—as mentioned above—it must be assessed what kind of relationship arrangement is realistic for the couple.

Homework: After balancing the relationship with the bond-enhancing exercises from the toolbox in Module 12, it is helpful to regularly “oil the gears” of the relationship.

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