

Hold Me Tight, Let Me Go in Norway

Background.

Over the past three years, over 60 families in Norway have experienced the Hold Me Tight, Let Me Go program for families with teenagers, developed by Nancy and Paul Aikin based on Sue's Hold Me Tight Program. How did all this start?

The Hold Me Tight, Let Me Go program addresses the attachment fears and needs of families with teenagers in the "breaking loose" phase, a group for which there has been little on offer in Norway. To cut a long story short, after having read a series of articles in the EFT Community News written by Nancy and Paul about their development of the Program, I contacted them and they offered to come to Norway. In April 2016 we had the great pleasure of hosting them at our small municipality on a peninsula in the Oslo fjord. We assembled 6 families (including my own) with our teenagers, and they took us step by step through the Program. I was pursuing my own EFT certification at the time, and my colleagues in the local mental health services for children and teenagers, were so to speak "blank" regarding EFT. However, seeds were sown in the fertile soil of an EFT spring.

The Challenges!

During the three years that have followed, we have worked intensively to make Nancy's, Paul's and Sue's ideas relevant for as many families with teenagers as possible in this very heterogeneous, half-rural setting. Our goal has been to establish the Program a regular feature of our low-threshold, preventive strategy for families in a community which on the one hand is very transparent and closely knit, and on the other is subject to the temptations and vulnerabilities from having a Capital city only 20 minutes away.

Since Nancy and Paul's visit, we have offered the Program twice a year - spring and fall. We have invited our families to help us evaluate the Program and have worked intensively within our team to make the Program as attractive, meaningful and effective for as many as possible.

The process that Hold Me Tight, Let Me Go invites families into, is designed to strengthen bonds within the family by paving the way for a safe and authentic exchange of experiences, primary feelings and longings between each teenager

and their parent/caregiver. The groundwork for this involves on the one hand helping the adults become aware of, understand and take responsibility for the negative cycles of interaction that crop up within the family – both between themselves as caregivers and between themselves and the teenager. On the other hand, it involves establishing an alliance with each teenager, fostering an awareness in relation to actions, emotions and attachment needs, then ensuring a safe space for an ensuing exchange focusing around these aspects of the teenager's experience. For the families we were hoping to engage, there were challenges associated with both areas. One was how to engage and involve the whole family when the adults may have difficulty acknowledging their role and responsibility in relation to the teenagers' behavior. Another was how to engage teenagers who either saw little or no hope of change within the family or were skeptical of the adults' agenda. Here we are talking about families who might find it difficult to see the significance of interactive program of this kind. Their wish might typically be for information about concrete strategies, ideas and tips about what to do to restore order, or for someone or something to change or "improve" their children.

Parental engagement and the structure of the Program

The Hold Me Tight, Let Me Go Program was originally conceived to run over an afternoon/evening and the whole following day. To help engage and foster a process of understanding among our families, we found it advantageous to split up the content of the Program into 4 sessions with gaps in between. This allows for parents to go home in between themes being addressed, observe and reflect over what is going on there. In our experience, participants come back each time with a more nuanced and articulated view of their interactions, can share their experiences with each other, feel more understood and acknowledged. Peer support becomes stronger and after-course evaluations indicate that this strengthens the parents' confidence in their own importance and influence in their teenager's life.

Teenager alliance and involvement

Facilitating an active process within the family necessarily involves engaging the teenager both as informant and influential part in the interactions playing out in the home. Making the teenagers' perspective, their feelings and longings known is of course critical for both the parents understanding of the negative cycle in the family, and for their motivation to initiate and engage in a de-escalation and change process. However, it would have been very difficult if

not impossible to recruit many of the families that we have involved if we had insisted on teenager participation at the outset. As with couple's work, the mutual experience of interaction based on another quality of understanding and emotional presence is necessary to both enhance and secure a reliable change in bonding. The challenge for us was how to secure an alliance with each teenager that would make it possible for them to trust their parents with their vulnerability and needs, and not just assume a superficial, avoidant or defensive/aggressive response modus.

The Teenager Interview.

Our solution was for a Program facilitator to meet each teenager individually in their own environment and talk with them about their relationship to their parents and their interactions at home. Using a structured interview guide we talk about what goes on, is experienced and felt seen from their perspective, secure in the knowledge that nothing will be passed on or used without their approval. We unpack their side of the cycle, their reactions, feelings and longings. The more the teenagers become aware of how important their views are for the work that we are trying to do with their parents, the more authentic they become. Many teenagers although skeptical at the outset, are positive afterwards saying things like "I have never had the chance to share these things before and feel taken seriously". When asked how it would be for their views, feelings and needs to be made known to their parents, their response has almost without exception been positive. The ground is thereby paved for the family dialogue.

The "Hold Me" Family Dialogue

In contrast to when working with couples, the relationship between a parent and a teenager is asymmetric. The crux for a successful family dialogue is that the teenager goes into the exchange feeling safe in the knowledge that his or her vulnerability will be respected and protected. The facilitator's role is very important here, and as a prerequisite to the family dialogue the facilitator will therefore meet the parents and share from the interview what the teenager has agreed on. Within this non-confrontational setting, the parents get a rare opportunity to take the teenagers perspective fully in. This reinforces the parent's understanding of and their responsibility for the negative cycle, which in turn primes them to embrace their teenager unreservedly when meeting for the family dialogue.

Both the teenage interview, feedback to the parents and family dialogue are normally arranged between the 2. and 4. Sessions, but it can also occur at a later point in time, depending on the process and readiness within the individual family.

Evaluation

Participants are asked to evaluate each session and the whole Program based on the relevance of the content, whether they felt listened to and taken seriously, and whether they liked doing what they were invited to take part in. On a scale from 0-10. All points taken together, average responses have moved from 7.5 when we started the Program in 2016, to 9.3 in 2018.

The nature of our interventions involves extending the Hold Me Tight, Let Me Go Program beyond the time-frame originally envisaged. The program runs over the period of about a month. Not all instances can do this of course, but our circumstances allow it, and this gives us an extra opportunity to meet and support each family's uniqueness and create a basis from which to follow them up in the community if necessary.

From being peripheral, attachment-based thinking and EFT has over the past three years become central to all aspects of work and cooperation within the Mental Health Services for Children and Youth in our municipality.

A film about Hold Me Tight, Let Me Go in Norway.

As part of our information and recruitment strategy, we have made a short film featuring one family whilst they were attending the Program. The film has now been subtitled in English and is available either the "Teaser" (3minutes) or the full-length version (13 minutes) from one of the following links.

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