

# Tri-Life Leadership Training

## **The Practice of a Process-Experiential, Emotion-Focused, Expressive Psychotherapy**

*(Themes, Concepts, and Ways to Approach)*

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(Please note that many of the ideas herein are based on good clinical evidence, but just as many are only judgments or guesses on my part. I take complete responsibility for the content. I thank Dan Jones and Gene Gendlin for the many ideas I have used here which they originated. Since this is not a scientific paper I list no references, but at this point I wouldn't know who to thank as I can no longer recall where I learned what, who taught it to me, or what was mine.)

### *BASIC ASSUMPTIONS*

- Personality patterns (thoughts and core beliefs, emotional reactions, behavioral acts, and interpersonal styles) are established early in life, instilled by our family of origin and the particular social and cultural environment we experienced.
- Each of us has done the best he/she could at the time and under the circumstances. The personality we formed (given our particular biological limitations) was our best attempt to cope with the world as we experienced it. Our personality is a "best defense" developed in response to shock (defined as the shutting down of our feelings in reaction to the startle and/or stress). Remind the participant that, "Nobody was born that way. Were you born with that?"
- Our emotional development (mostly formed in childhood) is directly related to the destructive patterns (thoughts, feelings and behaviors) we engage in later in life.
- Learning to change our emotional reactions is basic and foundational to creating a shift in the destructive beliefs, feelings, behavior, and interpersonal patterns in our adult lives.

### *PROCESS of FLOORWORK*

- Start with letting the Participant just 'settle-in'. Talk for a little bit about how they are doing and feeling. Let yourself and the Participant relax, laugh a little, and of course remember to breathe.
- When you're both ready, ask the Participant to close their eyes starting the process of shutting down their "daytime functioning." Be certain to reassure them that their safety is one of your primary concerns, and that you will be with them the whole time (note any and all exceptions).

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- Encourage them by letting them know that while it is scary and hard work, you will be there to help guide and support them. Point out that they will not have to face anything they are not ready to face, and that you are there to help them. You will help them face things they may already know but are afraid to admit, and to explore things they may not know about themselves, but are ready to bring to the surface
- Making the Participant feel safe is always the first order of business. Be aware that the message we need to communicate (mostly non-verbally) is one of unconditional love and that “we will never analyze or criticize you, or tell you how you should live your life.” When a Participant feels safe, amazing things happen!
- In addition, all that happens, happens-as-it-should, and is a gift in that it is a potential opportunity to learn something of value. (These instances are often labeled incidental learning, serendipity, or synchronicity.)
- First you need basic information in order to get a general picture of what happened to them. In addition to thoroughly knowing their homework, and observations made during the program, you can ask about what they see as their most important concerns, and what they most want to work on and resolve. As they relate their story and difficulties ask frequently, “And what led up to that? And then what led up to that?” Combine these questions with, “And how did that make you feel? And then how did that make you feel?” If appropriate, you can bring the emotional focus into the present, by asking, “And how does that make you feel right now?”
- Listen and look for the pattern(s) of distress, and what is holding this beautiful person back from being who they truly are and want to be.
- What is this ‘thing’ that is obscuring them? Is it denial, shock, hopelessness/helplessness, fear, anger, hurt, guilt, shame, sadness, disgust, grief? Look for the belief patterns that match the feeling states; you can access these by asking for verbal thoughts that describe the feelings and beliefs they have about themselves and others.
- Try to plan several ways to help the Participant get to what is there, so that if one doesn’t work you can shift gears into an alternative way. Usually, it requires several attempts before you find one that works. The one that works is the one that brings an emotional release; you can see it working, otherwise, it will just bring more flat talk.
- Remember each person is unique, and each story is unique. There is no substitute for fresh, creative thinking, so don’t panic if things don’t go immediately as expected. Be patient, you’ll get to where you need to go. It’s always an option to ask for help; try not to feel that asking for help is somehow a failing. We all get stuck at times. Sometimes we just need a

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breather to clear our heads. Consulting with the Facilitators doesn't mean we'll take over for you. Be sure to leave your ego at the door.

- It is crucial to realize that we need to hold the 'center' for each of our Participants. Remember that our capability to feel and express love, empathy, and compassion is basic to our ability to help others. Adults frequently say that as children they only really wanted one thing from their parents, to feel loved; to feel that when they walked into a room their parents' eyes lit up. When you see the Participants walk into the training room, what will your eyes do?

## STUCK PATTERNS

- If nothing you try seems to be working there may be one or several things happening.
- A hopeless/helpless pattern may be at work, or one of its cousins, endless struggle or chronic disappointment. You must focus on this issue first or you won't be able to proceed. The rug will be pulled out from underneath you every time you attempt to move forward. Ask them to remember a time when they did not feel hopeless, had to struggle, or were not disappointed. Name the pattern for them, or ask them to name it, and do release around the pattern. Often it's anger work about how the pattern held them back and sabotaged their enjoyment of life. You can let someone role play the pattern and then 'kill it' or release it with a 'goodbye' ritual. You may even be able to use 'reverse' psychology by having the Participant increase their expression of hopelessness, struggle, or disappointment. Humor is another way to gain control by laughing at the pattern. Pushing against the physicalized pattern can also be helpful.
- A rebellious/resistance pattern may be at work, so learn to honor the rebel in them, and remember all these patterns are just us trying to protect ourselves. See if you can align with their rebel, and get the rebel working for you and the Participant.
- There may be a kind of denial or a general lack of awareness occurring, so you have to adjust your goals to a more limited end. You need to refocus and remember to be gentle in approaching what they must deny; they are likely to be fearful or ashamed of something so powerful that it has been kept out of their consciousness for a reason.
- A shock pattern may exist; they are not yet ready to have their feelings. It is just too threatening. Here you must take them step by step starting from ready to think about coming out of shock to ready to come out of shock.

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- It may be a basic biological/physiological factor, or it may have just recently come up. Check on things such as alcohol or drugs (including certain OTC or prescription drugs), illness or allergies (esp. food), or fatigue. It's also helpful to ask about their sleep and eating habits.
- A transference or counter-transference reaction may be happening (somebody reminds the other of somebody else). These reactions can be positive or negative transferences, either way they cause problems.
- Deeper feelings may be obscured by channeling everything into one form of release, one with which they feel safer. Everything may be going into say anger release as a way to avoid sadness. Find out what the avoidance is about so you can help them face their fear in a gradual, supportive manner.

## *DESTRUCTIVE EMOTIONS and PATTERNS*

- If the Participant exhibits a certain emotion or pattern you recognize or suspect, name it for them, and ask them about it. Help them understand what the emotion or pattern is about for them, the circumstances that induce it, and what they need to do to experience it, express or release it. Point out patterns to the Participants when you see them, and always ask permission to give them feedback. It also increases the 'buy-in.'
- Here's a little trick to use if you run into resistance around the awareness of emotions in the body. For example, if you identify a feeling in the body, and ask what it is, and they still cannot say what it is, then ask them "if it knew what it was about, what would that be? An offshoot of this is to ask them to use their intuition to help them identify what the feeling means. This will bring them headlong into their struggle, and into what they need to do to emotionally release it. If you are told something can't be done, go ahead and ask them to do the very thing they are afraid to do, just support them in it. Most of the time they'll just do it.
- Remember, it doesn't always have to be very dramatic to have a real intense emotional release. Emotional release is not synonymous with the physical act of doing something like hitting the mat. Don't let technique run you. Some release can be very quiet on the outside.
- There are numerous way to have an emotional release: (1) animated talking, (2) animated, inarticulate sounds (sighs, moans, groans, roars), (3) crying with tears, (4) burns or storming, a physical action (movement or dancing, yelling, squeezing, twisting, pushing, pulling, kicking, batting, throwing, berserk 'temper tantrum') that brings vasodilatation and warm perspiration, (5) shaking (trembling hands, chattering teeth, shuddering) that is accompanied by vasoconstriction and cool perspiration, (6)

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- laughing, often with tears, (7) yawning or stretching, (8) body positioning to recall certain emotional states.
- As you watch for emotional states or patterns, keep in mind the Cycle of Floorwork (see handout). The cycle is a set of rules (an algorithm) for solving a problem in a finite number of steps.
  - Our focus is to help the participants reduce the frequency, magnitude, intensity, or duration of the emotional tension that is holding them in place or keeping them stuck. We accomplish this by helping the Participants become more aware (decreasing the level of denial) about what happened to them, by helping them come out of shock and into feelings, by allowing them the opportunity to actually experience their feeling, especially in their body, and lastly, by encouraging expression of emotional energy (often in the form of some kind of physicalization, i.e., burns).
  - It may be helpful at times to share some of your own story (history or experiences); if you feel it will be instructive, as it may help put the participant at ease. This is especially helpful if it brings about a 'natural' bond by appropriate self-disclosure.
  - Remember, our job is done best when we keep them in their feeling as much as possible. (The exception may be when we are getting needed historical information.)
  - A very important part of permanent change in emotion-focused work is the integration of newly experienced material into a new story. This more cognitive re-narration or reframing of their life events is a central component for long-term change to take hold. It can have emotive components as when the new learning is stated publicly in affective or animated tones.
  - Another important component in the cycle of work leading to more permanent change is to anchor the new learning in the outside environment. We teach them how to transfer changes into their present life, especially their interpersonal (relational) life.
  - "Never good enough" is a common pattern. Look for how much or how well one has to do things, or when there's no time to rest, or when something always needs to be done or fixed. Look for list-makers, or doing two or three things at once just to keep up. Sometimes it's a person who can't stop worrying or says "if I can only make it through the next...." Also, someone who wants to be perfect, or never make a mistake, or always be right or make the right choice, or be saint-like. When the "if only, if only" never stops, and they are always looking for more money, a better car, the perfect mate, fewer weeds in the garden,

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- then you probably have a “never good enough” pattern. You can ask them to say these words and see what come up, “I’ve done enough for now,” and repeat it several times
- When an emotion comes up see if you can identify the antidote to the emotion, or at least what it would feel like if the emotion were given up (healed conclusion). Some examples are fear into safety, anger into forgiveness, guilt into self-forgiveness, or shame into self appreciation. To test if there is any work to do around a feeling, ask the participant to say the healed conclusion out loud. For example, “I am completely safe facing my divorce,” or “I am able to completely forgive my father for abusing me.” If the Participant cannot say these without complete conviction then work on those feelings remains to be done.
  - It helps also to ask, “Whose voice was that...or who taught you that...or where did you lean that... or who made you feel small”. You can also tell them to see the person they are dealing with, “in your mind’s eye, see their face (‘then’ or ‘now’ depending on what is more appropriate), and ask “what is their expression”. You can also ask things like, “Do you have their attention,” and “Tell them what you always wanted to say.” Suggest specific things for them to say like “You’ve done enough...you can rest now.”
  - Sometimes the confrontation with a parent, or whomever, can be from a supportive and gentle stance. When done in this manner, tears and sadness are likely outcomes. Afterwards, always ask, “How are you feeling now?”, and look for relief especially in the Participant’s body.
  - At some point a Participant may ask if their issue(s) or core belief(s) or pattern(s) will come back, or they may say that in their past experience things go away but always come back. You can tell them that’s how we heal. A chronic pattern is like a cloudy day. The first thing we see are little patches of blue that don’t last long. We keep working and the blue patches get bigger and bigger, and we keep working and the day goes from mostly cloudy to partly cloudy, and the occasional clouds get smaller and smaller until we are living mostly under a pretty blue sky. Emphasize the importance of continuing to ‘work’, and that it may take months to retrain their nervous system.
  - Recall that the nervous system is divided into the voluntary and the involuntary or autonomic system, and that the autonomic system is further divided into the sympathetic and the parasympathetic or relaxation system. Stress activates the sympathetic system.
  - People often experience a chronic low-grade stress response, more often than the traumatic ‘flight-or-flight’ response, and this too severely impacts

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the sympathetic system. This low grade stress brings a generalized feeling of tension, worry, vigilance. In one's body the reaction causes a steady stream of stress hormones, adrenaline and cortisol, released into the blood stream and carried to the brain. The brain in turn, under stress, searches for answers to the trouble, and will eventually find one, real or imagined. When something is perceived to be wrong, the stress response turns on, and something must be done to relieve it, whether or not it is a real threat. It goes from, "see bear" to "stress response" to "chronic stress response" and "see bears everywhere." Chronic low-grade stress leads to a kind of mind-drama, and results in tension in the body and shallow, quick or hesitant breathing. In order to shut off our brains to the stress response and stop worrying, we have to turn off the stress and turn on the relaxation response. This occurs by activating the parasympathetic system, or relaxation response. In our experience we do this by first providing an emotional release which then leads to the relaxation or calming response. The relaxation response can also be induced directly by any calming method, such as meditation or holding the Participant in a safe, nurturing manner

- As stated earlier it is often helpful to shift back and forth between a serious attention to emotions and a healthy ability to laugh at them. Liberal laughter is a much under-utilized method to relieve tension and induce the relaxation reaction, as long as it is not an avoidance or interruption of one's process. When you laugh together it counteracts the stress reaction, and is a form of emotional release itself. Ask how they feel after laughing. Crying and/or anger release frequently help, but so does laughing.
- Chronic patterns or emotional families are like a multi-headed dragon, you can attack any one of several heads. Each piece worked, if focused on, has its benefits and advantages. However, you can work on just one aspect and it still tends to positively affect the whole pattern.
- Again, I can't say it enough times; keep the focus on their feelings, their body and their breathing.
- You can get them started on work using feelings, bodily sensations, or breath as a focal point, or by asking them to simply tell you what issues they are working on at present, or you can suggest something from their homework if they are stuck. Early in the process, I often take an inventory of what is going on with them at the moment, and ask them to pick one issue they want to deal with or heal first.
- One simple way to get into their issues is by asking them to focus on their body, and see what is going on at the moment. In other words, ask what

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and where they are feeling something in their body, and then ask what it is trying to say, or if it had a voice what would it say. You can suggest a phrase for them to say, or take one they come up with, and have them repeat it several times, slowly from the place in their body they identified as reflecting something important. Have them say it out loud, but not robotically. I tell them to only say it when they really feel it.

Occasionally, I will also ask them to say it even if they don't yet feel it to see what comes up. I use this "fake it 'til you make it" approach to help them get at feelings that may be a little resistant at first. Even if they say they don't know what it is trying to say you can ask, "If it did know, what would it say?"

- Sometimes, I go on an 'emotional spelunking' trip with the Participant. This is a visualization technique where I create an image of us as small, inch size people equipped with mountain climbing gear, like in the movie "Fantastic Voyage." We go down together to the place in their body that they are feeling something, and see what's there and attack it from this visual point of view. Add as much detail and color as you can; get them to describe it in detail. Make sure there is a 'buy-in' to this approach.
- An alternative 'way-in' to the Participants' emotional world is to suggest an entrance-metaphor, such as going into one's abyss. Once they jump into their abyss, you have them start to look around for their emotional demons. It's always a good idea to get them to close their eyes for this process. Be flexible; the abyss can be anything or place. Again, get them to describe it in glorious detail, but keep them relaxed and keep them breathing. You can make direct suggestions like, 'Let's go looking for what's bothering you in your abyss or for the demons that plague your life.' Make sure the Participant doesn't have some religious issue with the metaphor.
- All of this is a creative process, so just try something, and if one thing doesn't work try another. If you are confident the Participant will trust that you will keep them safe, almost any approach will get them to where they need to go. Try to enlist them as a co-explorer with you, and they will direct you, thinking it is you directing them. Try not to panic or rush them, but at the same time keep them moving in some way. I have found that there is a point at which you have to take a leap of faith, and get them into something. You'll feel it; it's palpable, like a resistance or reluctance to take a chance, or a fear that they are not going to do it right or good enough. You have plenty of time, so you don't need to panic, just keep it moving.

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- Remember, in between the emotional release work you need to do some cognitive reframing and retelling of their story. This allows them to make sense of the work they just accomplished, and to integrate it into their thinking, especially, how they are now going to manifest their new learning in their life.
- Also, you can't get to everything; if you get to two or three major issues you have done more than enough. Maureen or I will be available to help out if you need our consultation, but remember it's your baby, and we're not planning on rescuing you. We trust you, and while it's not "sink or swim" you need to keep control of the process as the 'Primary' and we are there as your assistant/consultant.
- It's a long process and you need to take good care of yourself as well as your Participant. So take breaks (bathroom, food), you'll be in a better position to work well if you are fresh and rested. Someone else can watch your Participant while you are getting a break, or let both of you take a break at the same time. Be sensitive, however, to not breaking your Participant's concentration; there is a balance to be maintained. When another Participant is about to "come into the light," you and the Participant have a choice to make: Let your Participant get up and be involved with the Declaration, Cradle and Honoring, or keep them on the floor because you're working well, and you don't want to fracture the process. It's a judgment call, and you can advise them, but in the end they should make the decision.
- Here is another alternative to getting Participants into floorwork. The Focusing method developed by Gene Gendlin works very well as a gentle introduction to emotion-focused, experiential work. Briefly, there are nine steps. It starts with: (1) *clearing a space*, that is getting them to close their eyes, let the thoughts just drift, not trying to control them, breathing deeply (watch their bellies and make sure they release air slowly), and welcoming whatever comes up (I'll often tell them to shake hands with any issue that arises. This leads into (2) *cataloguing*, that is, a listing of issues that are present for them at the moment. As each one is listed and welcomed, it is put in a visualized box or container of some sort and placed on a shelf or aside for the moment as we go on cataloguing. Usually it is easy to generate five to eight items. When they are done cataloguing you ask them to pick one to work on, and to take it down off the shelf and place it in the center of the room. You can begin directly by asking them to explain more about the issue. When ready I ask them to walk slowly toward it, and to wait right in front of the container. When ready I ask them to jump in it. After they 'jump,' I'll go into (3) the *felt-*

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*sense* by asking them what they notice in their body. This is a crucial point; they need to focus on the experience itself. What they feel in their body is the thing, the raw data that is the actual issue at hand, not some verbal description of it. This is the *felt-sense*, the actual experience of the issue in the body. It's not the words that we describe our experience that is important here. Ask them specifically not to use any words at first, but only be aware of the experience in the body. When they have that experience down, and know how they can re-create it by first thinking of the issue and then focusing attention only on the experience in the body, then I ask them to (4) *label, name or handle* the felt-sense with words that accurately describe it. I caution them not to use "big" words or "high-order" concepts, but simple, descriptive words that give a picture of what it feels like. These can be listing synonyms or a metaphor ("it feels like ton of bricks"). Next is (5) *resonance* when you do a kind of double check on the accuracy of the labels. You ask them to think of the issue, then feel the felt-sense, then label it, and allow the mind to bounce back and forth between the felt-sense and the label or handle, and see if the handle is accurate. Frequently, you will get an elaboration or even a change of descriptors that more accurately depicts the experience. The next step is the (6) *insight or awareness* produced by asking the question, "What is this all about for you," or "Why are you here," or "What are you here to teach or tell me." First have them experience the felt-sense and the label. Ask them to ask the question of themselves and to repeat it to themselves, and if they "get lost" just remember and stay focused on the experience. Also, implore them to be patient with themselves, and not let the answer come from their mind so to speak, but let it bubble up from their body and their experience. This may take a minute or longer, which is a long time to be silent. Something will come up, be patient. When it does look for a shift in them, sometimes it is subtle. This is the *felt-shift*, a change in their feelings and in their understanding as they become aware of what it is that is bothering them. It's an "ah hah" experience. From here I ask (7) "*what is the worst* of this thing for you," the worst of what you remember or of what you expect. Next, I ask (8) "*what does it need to heal*," to move forward in some way, small or large. I tell them not to censor anything no matter how crazy it sounds, that even a wild thought often has a kernel of truth, and that something can be gleaned from any idea, even crazy sounding ones. Help them formulate a healing experience for themselves, translate an idea into an action or ask them to do it. If it is something that can be arranged now give them the experience, or suggest an experience that might help them heal. This is

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where they may do a burn or do some empty chair, or two-chair work. The next step is (9) asking if they can *accept the gift* their body has given them. Will they welcome with open arms the understanding they have achieved, and thank themselves for it, and breathe into their healing gift? Some have trouble accepting the truth they have encountered, and need some work around acceptance and why it is so hard for them. They may feel guilty or even ashamed of it. Sometimes focusing brings up several other issues or areas of focus so you can return to an earlier point and begin a new round of focusing on a newly revealed issue. Usually, this is a deeper issue.

- Regarding breathing, here is a helpful pointer, you can use an image of "my abdomen is a balloon and I'm going to blow it up." You can add, "Feel you sides expand right to your pelvic floor." I think it helps them to exhale slowly by pursing their lips like they were going to whistle. Try getting them to breathe deep and purr like a cat. Then, have them feel the vibrations all through their body. One feels a little muscle effort on the inhale, but the exhale is a letting go process, and should be no effort at all. Suggest feeling the rhythm of alternating tension and relaxation. Ask them to notice the pause at the end of the exhale, that's the point of greatest relaxation, so tell them not cheat themselves by grabbing for the next breath too soon.
- Here are still some other ways for getting to emotive material. Ask, "What is your earliest memory of something that has anything to do with...?" Another is, "What does that little boy/girl need to hear from you?" Yet another is, "Bring...here...Does he/she hear you? What does he (the child) want to say? Help the child, or have the adult part help the child if the child can't do/say it by him or herself.
- Teach the Participants how to say goodbye to old ways of being. Ritualize it for them if you can. This can be quite powerful.
- Grab their hand for support; remember to always ask permission to touch.
- Take them around the room when the time is right to declare a new self that has emerged.
- Use others for support, Staff or group members.
- Watch for another pattern that doesn't let one forgive oneself. Ask what it would feel like to be truly forgiven.
- Watch for a pattern that doesn't let one forgive others. We're not supposed to judge others; we're suppose to have good judgment. We can evaluate without condemning. Forgiveness is the absence of anger. Trust is the absence of fear. When we forgive someone we no longer

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- harbor resentment or the wish to harm them. That doesn't mean we necessarily want them around, or that we now trust them.
- When you bring in the parents or ghost parents, remember, it can be quite real just as if it they were actually transported back in time, recent or old. If the positive, loving side of their ghost or present day parents prevents them from looking at the negative aspects, then put the positive side away for the moment. I often use a 'jeweled box' to hold all that was dear and loving. Remind them the goal is not to have them hate their parent or prepare them to confront them, but to accept what happened, and realize that their parents were human and likely wounded themselves. Blame is not the point
  - If you see a pattern of chronic worry, then help them find their guard muscle; the one that protects them. You'll know it when that part of their body relaxes and the worry stops.
  - Watch for your own stuff, and how it may try to prevent you from facing the same in others.
  - Grief and knowing the stages of grief are important.
  - Watch for the fear of death. See if they are ready to come out of shock and feel. What is their recall around death when they were a child. One of four things usually happened: somebody died; the adults didn't handle it well, they went into shock or were scared and you learned to fear; there is an 'ungrieved' grief; we were taught that death is tied up with harsh judgments and terrifying threats; there's a sense of not having lived life well, we don't want our life to mean what it would mean if it ended now.
  - Two big questions to consider in evaluating what is going on with someone. First, is how long has this been happening, so we can work at the beginning root of the problem. Second, where does it exist in their body, and how is it going to come out. Find out, get it out and that's the whole of it. Our natural healing process will take over, and we'll feel better and think more clearly. Remember, emotional problems are not in the mind they're in the mindbody.
  - Consider this, shame is in your gut; fear in your shoulders, solar plexus and anal sphincter; anger in the back of the shoulders, back of the legs and the jaw; sadness around the eyes and in the throat and chest.
  - You guys are incredibly competent, and Maureen and I have the utmost faith in you or you wouldn't be here in the first place, so take that in. And, remember being competent doesn't mean you have to be perfect, or have to know everything, or that you never make a mistake! We love you all.