

# Emotional Thinness: When Relational Connective Tissue Needs a Workout

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My heart ached as I sat across from Tom, my stony-faced CEO client, as he explained his and his company's situation: "I don't know what's wrong. It just seems like any little issue can get out of hand. My employees are quitting for what seem to me like minor issues. And I don't know what's wrong with my buddy, Bill. He's not even talking to me anymore."

I had an idea of what was wrong and there wasn't a quick fix.

As part of our work together, Bill had taken the [EQ Profile](#) (an instrument that reveals our internal experience when challenged or under stress). I had coached Bill for almost a year and it was clear (both from our work together and his recent EQ Profile results) that he had limited access to his own emotions, a nearly empty joy bucket, little to no ability to empathize, and was easily triggered.

He suffered from what I call "emotional thinness."

**What is Emotional Thinness (ET)?**

Emotional thinness (ET)? (Never heard of it? I made it up. :)) You've met people ailing from ET and perhaps labeled it something else. It's a difficulty in producing relational connective tissue.

Just as connective tissues like ligaments and tendons provide structure and support for our bodies, authentic and sensitive conversations, empathetic compassion and meaningful collaboration make up the relational connective tissues that provide support and structure for our relationships. ET sufferers don't easily produce these things.

When you engage someone with ET, you'll notice, consciously or subconsciously, a lack of warmth from him or her. It's particularly noticeable in a group of people, say, at a party. You may steer clear of them because they may "flatten" your mood. That's not to say someone with ET walks around mean or cold or angry or negative. In fact, they may be smiling and happy. And your interaction with them may have a distant, transactional or distracted quality to it and your conversation may be shallow and without meaning.

ET is somewhat rare among CEOs because relationships are so important for developing a stable and productive work force and having successful customer relationships. And sometimes simple brute force, an intense work ethic or dynamic energy can overcome the fairly significant drawback of emotional thinness.

**What to do?**



The causes of ET are too varied and complex to describe here. It's fair to say that ET sufferers probably didn't have warm, secure, attuned relationships with their primary caregivers. That's not to say they were abused or neglected. Just that they didn't experience that relational connective tissue they needed in order to know how to produce it.

To overcome ET, what do you do? Connecting with others starts with connecting with yourself. The right coach or a therapist can help you better understand yourself. Also, EQ assessments like Learning in Action's [EQ Profile](#) can help you see the emotions you experience and those you don't access, measure your ability to empathize and see things from others' perspectives. Such instruments can help you access and understand your internal experience, and then provide you with choice as to whether or how you act on it.

Only by understanding yourself can you make the changes you need to establish relational connectivity and create the meaningful relationships that can withstand minor setbacks and what I call the thousand tiny paper cuts of being in relationship.

**Epilogue:**

For most of us, our internal experience is the wallpaper of our lives, something we don't directly look at, see, think about or question. It just is. And often once we do examine it, we can easily justify it. We've consciously or nonconsciously spent a lifetime constructing it. It's how the child in us learned to survive and defend itself. And that child isn't always the best person to trust in a relationship under stress.

Most of us don't magically transform overnight, and neither did Tom. He was quite shocked and confronted by his EQ Profile report. And initially, he pushed back mightily on his results. He didn't see himself as emotionally thin at all. He saw himself as generally happy and optimistic, with some good relationships.

However, the [EQ Profile](#) provided him with a snapshot of what goes on inside of him when he is stressed (which was a lot of the time in his role as CEO of a struggling company). And once he accepted the truth of it, he was able to understand why people reacted to him the way they did. And why small issues quickly became big ones.

The EQ Profile provided Tom with an awareness about himself that was new and impacted his entire life. Like all of us, he took his internal experience with him everywhere he went. And understanding that experience - his gut reactions, his tendencies, the emotions he did and didn't access, his focus, his beliefs about himself and others - empowered him with the information he needed to know about himself to begin to make more relational choices.

Sure, Tom and I regularly revisited his EQ Profile results in our coaching sessions over the next two years. And we did so because his internal experience (as illustrated by his EQ Profile results) continued to show up in the issues and challenges he brought to our work together.

By reflecting on and understanding his own internal experience, doing more to fill his own joy bucket and looking for his own contribution to any given interpersonal conflict, Tom began to develop compensating strategies that allowed him to become more relational and more connective.