

ATTACHMENT SIGNIFICANCE IN COUPLES THERAPY

An Introduction to Emotionally Focused Therapy

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WHAT IS EFT?

- ▶ Emotionally Focused Therapy was developed by Dr. Sue Johnson and Dr. Les Greenburg in the 1980s
- ▶ It is both experiential and systemic
- ▶ It is the most research supported couples therapy
- ▶ It is highly effective and generalizes to various populations and presenting problems

EFFICACY/OUTCOMES

- ▶ 70-73% recovery rate for EFT in 10-12 sessions, compared to 35% for behavioral interventions (Johnson, 2004)
- ▶ 90% rate of significant improvement (Johnson, 2004)
- ▶ Sustained gains 2 years after termination
- ▶ Positive impacts on depression, intimacy, trust
- ▶ EFT is proven to be as effective as EFT and communication training

FOUNDATION IN ATTACHMENT THEORY

- John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth, Phillip Shaver
- Seeking a secure base, a safe haven

“

All of us, from the cradle to the grave, and happiest when life is organized as a series of excursions, long or short, from the secure base provided by our attachment figure(s).”

-John Bowlby

ATTACHMENT THEORY

- Seeking and maintaining contact is a prime motivation; isolation is traumatizing
- A secure connection offers a safe haven to go to and a secure base to go out from the world. The more connected you are, the more separated/autonomous you can be.
- Accessibility and responsiveness builds bonds
- Disconnection cues separation distress

SEPARATION DISTRESS—A PREDICTABLE PROCESS

- Protest
- Cling and Seek
- Depression and Despair
- Detachment

ATTACHMENT THEORY

- Emotion is the music of the attachment dance—Sue Johnson
- It gives salience
- It colors events
- It cues the dance steps

SECURE ATTACHMENT IN STRANGE SITUATIONS

- Child can regulate distress, trusts relationship with attachment figure
- When reunited, child gives clear cues about needs and can ask without defensiveness.
- When attachment figure responds, child can take it in—trusts and accepts comfort. Child is calmed and soothed, receives reassurance.
- Child can then turn to environment and play and take risks with confidence.

SECURE ATTACHMENT IN STRANGE SITUATIONS

- Partner can regulate distress, trusts relationship with attachment figure
- When reunited, partner gives clear cues about needs and can ask without defensiveness.
- When attachment figure responds, partner can take it in—trusts and accepts comfort. Partner is calmed and soothed, receives reassurance.
- Partner can then turn to environment and play and take risks with confidence.

WHEN ATTACHMENT IS THREATENED OR DISTRESSED

- Limited responses
- ANXIOUS—up the ante “I’ll make you respond to me”
- AVOIDANT—turn the volume down “I’ll care less”
- FEARFUL—chaotic “Come here, go away!”

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ADULT AND CHILD ATTACHMENT

- Adult attachment is reciprocal
- Adult attachment is representational
- Adult attachment is sexual

SECURE COUPLES CAN...

- Retain emotional balance.
- Less flooded with anxiety or anger with disconnected or threatened. Less reactive or defensive.
- Tune in to the emotion clearly and unambiguously express needs and wants.
- Trustingly take in comfort and care.
- Deal with ambiguous responses with less catastrophizing or numbing
- Give the benefit of a doubt and resist fixed negative appraisals of partner

SECURE COUPLES CAN...

- Maintain a positive image of self
- Turn toward others with empathy and caring
- Learn and adapt to new situations
- Participate in sexual connections and caregiving more effectively



COUPLES THERAPY BASED ON ATTACHMENT THEORY:

- Focuses on attachment needs and forms of connection and disengagement
- Privileges emotion
- Creates the therapy session as a secure base
- Shapes new bonding events
- Addresses impasses like attachment injuries

EFT CORE ASSUMPTIONS

- Rigid interactions reflect and create emotional states and absorbing emotional states reflect and create rigid interactions.
- Partners aren't sick or unskilled, they're stuck in habitual ways of dealing with intense emotions
- Emotion is the target and agent of change
- Change involves new experience and new relationship events
- Effective couples therapy addresses the security of the bond, mutual accessibility, and responsiveness.

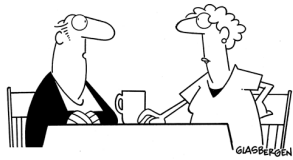
CUE TO ACTION TENDENCY

- Cue (trigger) leads to rapid appraisal of environment and body arousal
- Meaning/reappraisal leads to emotion which leads to the action tendency

EMOTION AND ACTION TENDENCY

Anger	Assert/Defend
Sadness	Seek help/Withdraw
Surprise/Excitement	Attend/Explore
Disgust/Shame/Guilt	Hide/Expel/Avoid
Fear	Flee/Freeze/Give Up
Love/Joy	Contact/Engage

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"I talked about my feelings on our wedding day.
If anything changes, I'll let you know."

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FOCUS OF EFT

Experiential

- Present Moment (emotion brings past alive, past is used to validate blocks in present)
- Primary Affect (focus and validate)

Systemic

- Process (across time/pivotal moments)
- Patterns of interaction (self sustaining feedback loops)

THE THERAPIST IS A PROCESS CONSULTANT

3 STAGES OF EFT

- ▶ Stage 1—De-escalation
- ▶ Stage 2—Restructuring the Bond
- ▶ Stage 3—Consolidation

STAGE 1—DE-ESCALATION

- ▶ Step 1—Assessment—alliance and conflict issues
- ▶ Step 2—Identify negative cycle where those issues exist
- ▶ Step 3—Assess underlying emotions in cycle
- ▶ Step 4—Reframe problem in terms of cycle, underlying emotions and attachment needs

STAGE 2—RESTRUCTURE THE BOND

- ▶ Step 5—Access unmet attachment needs and fears
- ▶ Step 6—Promote acceptance by the other
- ▶ Step 7—Structure emotional engagement, expression of needs/bonding events

Do withdrawer first, then repeat steps 5-7 with pursuer

STAGE 3—CONSOLIDATION

- ▶ Step 8—Facilitate new solutions to old problems
- ▶ Step 9—Consolidate new positions and cycle of attachment behavior (New stories of problems and repair)

EFT INTERVENTIONS

- ▶ **Empathic Reflection**
- ▶ Creates safety
- ▶ Slows processing
- ▶ Distills and crystalizes experience

This is the most basic EFT intervention, used in alliance building and creating safety. The goal is to guide the partners into this responsiveness with each other.

EFT INTERVENTIONS

RISSSC

- Repeat
- Images
- Simple words
- Slow pace
- Soft voice
- Client's own words

Benefits include accessing mirror neurons and bypassing/soothing amygdala

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"My wife and I haven't spoken to each other in weeks.
We're both trying to be better listeners."

INTERVENTIONS IN EFT

- Validate, especially their regulation strategy
- Evocative questioning
- Heightening to deepen emotional engagement
- Interpret—SMALL conjectures, leading edge, tentative, with proxy voice

INTERVENTIONS IN EFT

- ▶ Reflect cycle
- ▶ Reframe with attachment meaning
- ▶ Enactments

PROBLEM WITH ENACTMENTS

- ▶ They make clients anxious
- ▶ They make therapists anxious
- ▶ Therapists don't know how to use them

ENACTMENTS

- ▶ Crystalize present positions—own them
- ▶ For diagnostic purposes—identify blocks
- ▶ Turn new emotional experiences into new responses to partner
- ▶ Heighten new responses
- ▶ Choreograph specific change events in Stage 2

NEXT STEPS

- OKCEFT www.okceft.com
- Externship—formal step 1 training offered Spring 2022
www.okceft.com
- Core Skills—formal step 2 training—offered in OKC fall 2022
- Stay in touch with EFT developments and trainings in Oklahoma through the email updates. Sign up at www.randeetomlinson.com

REFERENCES

- The Practice of Emotionally Focused Therapy—Dr. Sue Johnson
- LoveSense—Dr. Sue Johnson
- Hold Me Tight—Dr. Sue Johnson
- Inspiration and guidance from ICEEFT certified trainer, Debi Scimeca-Diaz
