

Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy: Creating Secure Attachment Bonds

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Objectives

Brief Overview:

- Foundations of EFT
 - Attachment Theory & Couples Therapy
 - A Glimpse into a Change Event
 - Theological Meeting Points
 - EFT: A Beginner's Diary
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Overview

Johnson & Greenberg (1988) Johnson (1996; 2004)



Les Greenberg: Psychologist, York University, Toronto.

Mainly EFT w/individuals.

Leading process researcher.

EFT w/ind. empirically validated.



Sue Johnson: Psychologist, University of Ottawa.

Student of Les in early 1980's.

Interested in couples therapy and attachment theory.

Overview

EFT – “Empirically Supported”

Major Reviews

Empirically Supported Couple Therapy: Behavioral Couple Therapy, Integrated Behavioral Couple Therapy, and Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (Snyder, Castellani, & Whisman, 2005).

Meta-analysis: EFT studies demonstrate a 70 – 73% rate of improvement and an effect size of 1.31 for the four outcome studies composing the EFT meta-analysis (Johnson, 2003).

Robust Approach: EFT applied to a variety of treatment conditions: Depression, Post-partum Depression, Chronic Illness, Eating Disorders, Infidelity / Attachment Injuries, Trauma Exposure.

Foundations of EFT

- **Experiential Theory**
 - **Systemic Theory**
 - **Attachment Theory**
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Foundations

Experiential Orientation

(Rogers, 1951 & Perls, 1973)

- Focus on affect, intrapsychic element.
 - Therapist active moment-by-moment.
 - Ex. *Your voice lowers as you say that...*
 - *You just glanced at her while talking, what's happening?*
 - *Can you tell him that right now please?*
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Foundations: Experiential

- **Non-pathologizing**

- Ex. I do believe I would respond a similar way under the same circumstances and life history.

- The EFT therapist refuses to thumb thru the DSM in their minds in-session.

- **Cross-cultural relevance/sensitivity**

- inherent in therapist's reflective and learning stance (Spangenberg, J.J., 2003).

Foundations

Systemic Orientation (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981)

- **Interpersonal patterns**

- Ex. Attack/Attack, Attack/Withdraw, Withdraw/Withdraw

- **Interpsychic emphasis**

- Tracking patterns, but emphasize the underlying emotions fueling them.
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Foundations: Systemic

- **Relationally focused**
 - We are best known in relationship.
 - **Non-pathologizing**
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Foundations

Attachment Theory

(Bowlby, 1988; Hazan & Shaver, 1987)

- Offers a theory of relationship
 - Context for empirical findings
 - Offers a “map”
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Attachment: Basic Elements

- We have an innate need to seek and maintain contact with significant others (Johnson, 2004)
 - Emotional accessibility and responsiveness builds bonds
 - Presence of attachment figures creates comfort and security; absence creates distress
 - Involves working models of self and other
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Attachment: Basic Elements

Attachment Style

- develops through repeated interactions between a child and parental figure
 - flows through childhood into adolescence and adulthood
 - Bowlby: Attachment is active in all of us from **“cradle-to-grave.”**
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Attachment: Basic Elements

Attachment Styles:

- **Secure**

- “I can count on you to be there for me when I need you. I can trust you. I am lovable and able to elicit caring.”

- **Anxious**

- “Sometimes I can count on you but sometimes I can't. I don't know if I can trust you. Am I lovable?”

- **Avoidant**

- “I can't count on you. I can't trust you. I don't need you.”
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Attachment: Basic Elements

- A secure connection offers a safe haven and fosters autonomy (Johnson, 2004).
 - Fear and uncertainty activate attachment needs.
 - Products of separation distress
 - Angry protest, anxiety, clinging, depression, despair, detachment
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EFT Foundations-Attachment

Marital distress seen as *separation distress* stemming from an *insecure bond*

- Therapist can doggedly focus on end goal – bringing couple together in a secure emotional bond.
- Immensely helpful in “clearing the smoke” when things seem bizarre and hot.
 - *Ex. “You get so mad, you yell and scream at her! But underneath that anger is a part of you that longs for her again. This part gets so lonely, but you don’t dare show this part, am I seeing this right?”*

EFT Foundations-Attachment

- **Depathologizes dependency (Bowlby, 1988).**
 - Ex. “You want so badly to connect with her again. You miss her so much, don’t you (he nods yes). It’s like you’re saying, ‘I am not all of me without your touch, without your caress, without my soul mate!’” (That’s it, yes, it’s **so** true.)
- **Autonomy and connectedness two sides of same coin (Vatcher & Bogo, 2001).**
 - Ex. Correct me if I am wrong here Becky, but it seems like you’re saying, “I can come and go so much easier when I know where we are, that we are on the same page, that we are connected emotionally.”

Emotion

- Contain important information
 - Need to be aroused and processed to promote change
 - *Emotion is the music to the attachment dance*
 - Exploring them helps us make sense of our experience – gives meaning
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Emotions in EFT

Primary

- Initial bodily-felt response
 - Often overlooked and unattended to.
 - Ex: Sadness, Fear, Anger, Shame
 - Accessing clients' disowned aspects of experience often leads to greater vulnerability and an expression of the need for connection to their partner.
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Emotions in EFT

Secondary

- Response/Reaction to the primary emotional experience.
 - Ex: Anger, Hostility, Apathy, Frustration
 - Reactive and organized to protect from primary emotions – often used to invalidate or dismiss primary responses
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General Assumptions of EFT

- 1. Rigid Interactions reflect/create “absorbing” emotional states**
 - 2. Absorbing emotional states reflect/create rigid interactions**
 - When I sense you’re not there, I get hurt, I show you anger, my anger hurts you, you respond in like kind with anger. All the while we are both distancing emotionally from each other – hurt and loneliness ensue very quickly.
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General Assumptions of EFT

3. Partners are not sick or developmentally delayed – they are stuck

- Above pattern may have similarities in past that make partners sensitive to responses and reactions (i.e. attachment styles) – but focus remains on present relationship interactional pattern and underlying emotions.
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General Assumptions of EFT

4. **Emotion is seen as target & agent of change.**

 5. **Change involves new experience and new relationship events.**
 - “Hot” emotional, attachment-laden processing and enactments in time restructure the attachment bond.
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General Assumptions of EFT

- 6. Effective couple therapy addresses the security of the bond, mutual accessibility & responsiveness.**
- Attachment views of self and other merge vividly into present experiencing with a goal of in-session building of safety and security.
 - In time, each partner risks reaching to the other from the most feared and vulnerable parts of themselves, asking to be accepted and comforted.
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Overview

Stage I: Cycle – De-escalation

- Identify negative cycle - problem pattern.
 - Assess underlying attachment issues / themes.
 - Access underlying attachment related emotions.
 - Frame distress in terms of a cycle and underlying attachment needs/fears.
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Overview

Stage II: Changing Positions

- Elicit partners attachment related affect (fears, longings).
 - Promote acceptance of other – expand the dance.
 - Structure emotional engagement – facilitate expression of attachment related needs and longings.
 - **Results:** New positions: Engaged Withdrawer, Softened Blamer.
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Overview

Stage III: Consolidation

- Reinforce new positions and pattern.
 - Help process reoccurrence of negative cycles.
 - Heighten new stories: Tracking positive patterns.
 - Reinforce new solutions to old issues: Strengthen steps made to maintain a more secure relationship.
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Stage II Example

EFT Softening Event Process:

- Therapist accesses & heightens attachment-related fears.
 - Fears interfere with attempts to make connection.
 - Therapist slows pursuer to access underlying needs.
 - Therapist facilitates sharing of attachment – related need.
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EFT: Theological Perspectives

Attachment Bonds – Covenant

Covenant Fidelity – Intrinsic meaning (Barth)

“The conscious acceptance of covenant responsibilities is the inner meaning of even the "natural" or systemic relations into which we are born and of the institutional relations or roles we enter by choice, while this fabric provides the external framework for human fulfillment in explicit covenants among men [humanity]. Ramsey, P. (1970) *Patient as Person*.

Covenant as both premise and promise (Atkinson)

Covenant is the basis of marriage not its moral goal.

Covenant assume obligation, sacrifice, and blessing.

EFT: Theological Perspectives

Attachment Bonds – Covenant / Fidelity

Primal Trust – Foundational (Brueggemann)

“To be fully human, so Israel testifies, is to have a profound, unshakable, elemental trust in Yahweh as reliable, present, strong, concerned, engaged for; ... to live and act on the basis of that confidence even when Yahweh is not visible and circumstances attest to the contrary.” p. 466-67

Storied Reality – Communal (Hauerwas)

“It is fidelity that comes by being formed by a community whose life is sustained by a God who has proved faithful to us through the call of his people, Israel, and the establishment of the new age in Jesus Christ. Only people so formed are capable of the kind of promise we make in marriage, that of life long fidelity.”

EFT: Theological Perspectives

Experiential Process – “Relationality”

“Agocic” and incarnational moments. (Anderson)

Facilitating a process promoting learning moments.

Integration: Presence and encounter.

Perichoresis – Analogical implications on personhood
(Gunton, Shults)

Movement away from faculty psychology / dualism.

Transcendence – communion / relational.

EFT: Theological Perspectives

Parallels with “Emergent Church”

Evangelism: “Belonging precedes believing, becoming.”

Community: Emphasis on safe places for conversations.
Fostering / interpreting spiritual experiences.

Approach: Spiritual consultants.

Missional: Being part of God’s mission in this world.

A Beginner's Experience: The Top 10

1. Focus
 2. Attachment Reframes
 3. Assessment
 4. Slow down!
 5. Non-expert stance
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A Beginner's Experience: The Top 10

6. Occurrence of cycle as assessment tool
 7. Enactments as assessment tool
 8. Nonverbal behavior
 9. Emotion in stage 1
 10. Be yourself
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1) Focus

- Emotions? Attachment themes? Cycle? Interventions?

- ** What stage are you in? What steps within the stage?

- ** Attachment themes: The relationship is your client.

- ** Experiential foundation

2. Attachment Reframes

Examples

- “When you need her, it’s like you can’t find her.”
 - “It’s like you’re knocking on the door and he won’t let you in.”
 - “So you want to be there for her, but she doesn’t reach for you?”
 - “You can’t get through her wall. You’re shut out.”
 - “When you feel connected to her, it’s like nothing else matters.”
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3. Assessment

- Informal assessment, including attachment
 - “Did you ever let her in on your grief? What goes on when you think about sharing that with her?”
 - “Did you ever tell him how hard that was on you?”
 - “As a child, who did you go to when you needed comfort?”
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4. Slow down!

- Slow down the couple
 - Slow and lower voice
 - Verbalize the need to slow down
 - Access and process primary emotion
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5. Non-expert stance

- Our clients are the experts

Examples

- “I don’t know, I’m just learning about you, but....”
 - “Help me understand, it seems like...”
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6. Occurrence of cycle as assessment tool

- Early in EFT process
 - Helps clarify partners' positions
 - Reflect your observations
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7. Enactments as assessment tool

- Can help elucidate positions
 - Process experience of enactment
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8. Nonverbal behavior

- Pay attention to it!

Tears

Deep breath

Looking down

Voice softening

Shift in seat

Hand wringing

- Entry point into emotion
 - Reflect and process
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9. Emotion in Stage 1

- Access and reflect rather than heighten
 - Understand their experience
 - Don't give up!
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10. Be yourself

- Different training
 - It is okay to step out of EFT in session!
 - Fit EFT into *your* personality
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For More Information



www.theEFTzone.com