

Day of Healing

Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy: Creating Secure Attachment Bonds

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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 – an “Empirically Supported Treatment”

Major Reviews

- Behavioral Couple Therapy and Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy only 2 couple therapy approaches that have been evaluated in multiple trials (Sprenkle, 2005).
- 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, S. M. (2003) The revolution in couples therapy: A practitioner-scientist perspective. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 29, 365-385.

Overview

EFT – a robust clinical approach

- **Couples:** Johnson, S., Hunsley, J., Greenberg, L., & Schindler, D. (1999). *Clinical Psychology: Science & Practice*, 6, 67-79.
- **Attachment Injuries:** Johnson, S.M., Makinen, & Millikin, J. (2001) *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 27, 145-156.
- **Infidelity:** Johnson, S. M. (in press) *Journal of Couple & Family Relationship Therapy*.
- **Chronic Illness:** Knowal, J., Johnson, S. M. & Lee, A. (2003) *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 29, 299-310
- **Chronically Ill Children:** Clothier, P., Manion, I., Gordon Walker, J., & Johnson, S. M. (2002) *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 28, 391-399.

Overview

EFT – a robust clinical approach

- **Depression:** Dessaulles, A., Johnson, S. M. & Denton, W. (2003) *American Journal of Family Therapy* , 31, 345-353.
- **Trauma.** Johnson, S. and Williams Keeler, L. (1998). Creating healing relationships for couples dealing with trauma. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 24, 25-40.
- **Bulimia:** Johnson, S., Maddeux C., Blouin J. (1998). Emotionally focused family therapy for bulimia: Changing attachment patterns. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, 35, 238-247.
- **Postpartum Depression:** Whiffen, V., & Johnson, S. M. (1998) An attachment theory framework for the treatment of childbearing depression. *Clinical psychology, Science & Practice*, 5, 478-492.

Foundations of EFT

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

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?*

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 emphasizes the underlying emotions fueling them.
- Relationally focused
 - You are best known in relationship.
 - Ex. When he says he's angry, you get scared, you run for cover.
- Non-pathologizing (fits well with experiential perspective)
- Context Specific

Foundations

Attachment Theory

(Bowlby, 1988; Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

- Offers a theory of relationship
- Context for empirical findings
- Offers a “map”
 - A theoretical and “in-session” map. Extremely relevant.

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

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”**.

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.”

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

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
- Inform, do not determine
- Open the door to our needs and wants
- *Emotion is the music to the attachment dance*
- Exploring them helps us make sense of our experience – gives meaning
- Motivate interpersonal actions

Emotions in EFT

Primary

- Initial bodily-felt response
 - Often overlooked and unattended to.
- Ex: Sadness, Fear, Hurt, Shame
- Accessing clients' disowned aspects of experience may lead to greater vulnerability and an expression of the need for connection to their partner

Secondary

- Response 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

Emotions in EFT

Primary

She is sad and afraid because she feels alone in the relationship – wondering if he cares about her. He seems so indifferent.

Secondary

He doesn't see her fear and sadness, what he sees is her angry attack, which is a reaction to the fear and sadness. She often hides her sadness not knowing that he would respond. She is quick to confront him on ways he is not responsive to her. She is frequently frustrated by his lack of attentiveness to everyday issues that are symbolic to her that he does not care.

Small Groups

- **Take a few minutes and discuss with those around you:**
 - How might attachment theory begin to explain some of what you saw?
 - What emotions did you notice?
 - What did the therapists seem to focus on?

General Assumptions of EFT

1. Rigid Interactions reflect/create “absorbing” emotional states.
2. Absorbing emotional states reflect/create rigid interactions.
 - When I sense you are 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.

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 the focus remains on the present relationship interactional pattern and underlying emotions.

General Assumptions of EFT

4. Emotion is seen as target & agent of change.
 - Attachment-related affect drives the attachment dance.

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

General Assumptions of EFT

5. 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.

Model Overview

Stage I: Steps 1- 4

- Identify negative cycle/attachment issues.
- Access underlying attachment emotions.
- Frame problem in terms of cycle and underlying attachment needs/fears.

Culminates in: Cycle De-Escalation

Model Overview

Stage II: Steps 5 - 7

- Access implicit needs, fears, models of other and self.
- Promote acceptance of other – expand the dance.
- Structure emotional engagement – express attachment needs.

Stage Two: Restructuring The Bond

Stage II Culminations

Key Change Events:

- Engagement of the more withdrawing partner (must precede softening event).
- Softening of more blaming spouse (Bradley & Furrow, 2004).

Model Overview

Stage III: Steps 8 & 9

- Reinforce new positions and cycles.
- Help process through reoccurrences of negative cycles.
- Heighten new stories by tracking positive stances and interactions.
- Reflect new solutions to old issues – how far they've come. How they risk, how they are there for each other.

Culminates in: Consolidation/Integration

A Glimpse into EFT Step 7:

- Therapists are accessing & heightening attachment-related fears of reaching out to the other, and letting the partner see the real her.
- Fear blocks attachment attempts.
- Spouses usually react to it, and push it away with anger or distance.
- Therapists slow the process down, hoping to process the fear, both intrapersonally (inside) and interpersonally (in-between), rather than run from it.

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