Emotionally Focused Therapy for Couples
Building Bonds and Creating Connections
James L. Furrow, Ph.D.

Learning Objectives

Participants will…

- Learn to conceptualize the dynamics of marital distress in an attachment context.
- Discuss the guiding assumptions of EFT theory of change.
- Identify the principle change events in EFT that foster a more secure bond.
- Gain experience practicing EFT interventions.
- Identify the steps of EFT that help couples leave destructive patterns and move to a positive attachments that foster resilience and growth.

Marital Therapy May Be Hazardous to Your Marriage (Doherty, 2002)

Common Pitfalls
- Therapists working from individually based models
- Therapists lacked experience/expertise

Best Practices
- Therapist active involvement
- Structured process
- Hope for relationships

Distressed Couples are More Likely to Show (Gottman, 1998)
- Greater negative affect reciprocity.
- Less positive sentiment override.
- Demand/withdraw pattern common
- Increased aversive conflict behaviors
- Enduring patterns of negative attribution.
- Greater likelihood physiological arousal.

Conflict Patterns (Gottman, 1994)
- Criticism - attacking a partner’s personality or character.
- Contempt - attempts to hurt partner through name calling, insults, sarcasm, body language.
- Defensiveness - attempts to protect oneself from attack by denying responsibility, making excuses, negative mind reading, whining, yes butting.
- Stonewalling - withdraws emotionally, verbally, or physically from the argument.

Emotion Focus (Greenberg, 2002)
Characteristics of Emotion and Therapy
- Emotion is a signal
- Emotion provides salience
- Incongruence can be pathogenic (cognitive, affective, and physiological responses)
- Emotions need to be aroused and processed to promote change
- Clinical intervention promotes emotional regulation

Universal Emotions
- Anger, joy, sadness, fear, shame, and surprise
Types of Emotion

Primary Emotion - adaptive and motivational – they prompt action – adaptive when they signal a need for contact or support. (e.g. protest, fear, sadness).

Secondary Emotion - reactive – defensive coping responses – reaction to a reaction – may be used to invalidate or to protect primary emotions. (e.g. anger, withdrawal, apathy, numb).

Instrumental Emotion - manipulative feelings – serving a relational purpose (e.g. “martyr role”, “crocodile tears”).

Emotion Focus in Relationship

- The way people regulate their emotions (and thus engage their partner) is a key factor in the quality of a relationship.
- Emotion signals are the music of the dance between partners. The music and the actions of one pulls a corresponding response from the other.

**Attachment Theory: Conceptualizing Couple Distress**

- Attachment System: Behavioral activating system motivating proximity seeking with significant others in a time of need.

Attachment Security:

- “Is an attachment figure available and likely to be responsive to my needs?”
- “Will you be there when I need you most?”

Attachment and Emotion Regulation

- If attachment figure is *available and responsive* to distress signals, the child learns to *regulate distressing emotions*.
- If attachment figure is *unavailable and/or unresponsive* in stressful situations, the child learns that distress is associated with negative outcomes. The child learns that distressing emotions can not be effectively regulated.

For Bowlby, these early expectancies formed…

- the experience of negative emotions.
- the preferred ways of coping with these emotions.
- internalized “working models” that inform “views” of self and others.

Attachment History - (View of Self and View of Other)

- “When you were young (ages 6 – 10) who did you turn to for care and comfort in a time of need? Can you tell me what that was like?”

Secure: A person is better able to acknowledge and cope effectively with negative emotions. Adults are self-confident, socially skilled, interested in close, romantic relationships, and more likely to form stable and satisfying long-term relationships.

Avoidant: A person *often attempts* to block out negative emotions, and are uncomfortable seeking support. Adults lack self-confidence, are worried about rejection and abandonment. They are prone to bouts of jealousy and anger. They see partners as untrustworthy. Seek romantic relationships, but may choose ill-advised partners.

Anxious: A person is highly emotionally expressive but often cannot regulate their emotions. Adults are uncomfortable with closeness, self-disclosure, dependence on others, and are more socially unskilled.
Attachment Strategies: Secondary Responses to Attachment Insecurity

- Avoidant: De-activating - Overregulated emotional responding
- Anxious: Hyperactivating – Underregulated emotional responding

Working Models

Withdrawer
“I never get it right or make her happy.”
“I don’t bother anymore what’s the point.”
(Feelings: Rejected, inadequate, fears failure, overwhelmed, judged, shame, empty, alone)

Pursuer
“He’s never around and whenever he is he’s always distracted.”
“She doesn’t see me. No matter what I do I don’t count in her world.”
(Feelings: Hurt, unwanted, invisible, abandoned, desperate, deprived, not important)

Attachment Strategy Variations in Emotional Reactions to Relational Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Secure</th>
<th>Avoidant</th>
<th>Anxious</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partner acts negatively</td>
<td>Protest anger</td>
<td>Suppressed anger, hostility, resentment</td>
<td>Resentment, despair, anger, hostility, sadness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner acts positively</td>
<td>Happiness, joy, love gratitude</td>
<td>Indifference</td>
<td>Ambivalence: love, happiness, fear, anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship distress</td>
<td>Guilt, reparation</td>
<td>Resentment, hostility</td>
<td>Shame, despair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship happiness</td>
<td>Happiness, pride, joy</td>
<td>Hubris</td>
<td>Ambivalence, fear of success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other’s distress</td>
<td>Empathy, compassion</td>
<td>Pity, Hostility, Contempt, Gloatting</td>
<td>Personal distress or despair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other’s happiness</td>
<td>Empathy, happiness, respect, admiration</td>
<td>Hostile, envy</td>
<td>Ambivalence: Happy, jealousy, fears separation</td>
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</tbody>
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Adapted from Mikulincer & Shaver (2005). P. 152.

Emotion is the language of attachment. It is the music of a couple’s dance. Change the music – change the dance. Using an attachment lens the therapist will…

- listen and validate each spouse's experience.
- frame symptomatic behavior in terms of attachment.
- accesses primary emotions using expressive cues.
- use affective moments to help client explore perceptions of mutual availability.
- frame symptoms as distorted expressions of normal attachment needs.
- facilitate the sharing of fundamental concerns for and desire of the other's availability and commitment.

EFT Overview and Theoretical Assumptions

EFT is a process experiential approach focused on promoting more secure patterns of interaction. EFT helps couples identify stuck patterns of interaction that are informed by negative affect. EFT fosters individual awareness / experience of more adaptive emotional responses and attachment related affect / needs.

EFT facilitates the expression/engagement of emotional experience and attachment related needs between partners.

www.theEFTzone.com
The EFT Process of Change

9 Steps and Stages of Change (Johnson 2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CYCLE DE-ESCALATION</th>
<th>RESTRUCTURING INTERACTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Establish a safe therapeutic alliance &amp; begin assessment.</td>
<td>5. Access implicit needs, fears, models of other and self.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Identify negative interactional cycle and secondary emotion.</td>
<td>6. Promote acceptance of other – elicit new responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Access attachment-related emotion underlying interactional positions and cycles.</td>
<td>7. Structure emotional engagement – express attachment wants and needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Reframe the problem as the cycle, validating secondary &amp; processing primary emotion, &amp; attachment needs</td>
<td>CONSOLIDATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Facilitate the emergence of new solutions to old problematic relationship issues.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Consolidate new positions and cycles of attachment behavior.</td>
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Shifts in Treatment Focus


Stage 2. Restructuring Interaction: Position → Deepen Experience / Attachment Frame / Promote Acceptance → Engage New Position

Stage 3. Consolidation: Forming New Pattern → Consolidation

Working with Emotional Experience in EFT

- **Accept** – Reflect and validate emotional experience.
- **Access** – Evocatively respond to emotional cues – primary emotion.
- **Expand and delineate** – Promote a working distance through emotional regulation.
- **Engage** – Facilitating the sharing of primary emotional experience.

Attachment Related Emotion: Protest, Sadness, Fear, Shame

Emotion as a Process (Arnold, 1960)

- **ACTION-TENDENCY**: Attacks
- **RE-APPRAISAL**: His silence = His indifference
- **AROUSAL**: She goes hot, shallow breathing, flushes
- **APPRAISAL**: General distress, negative experience

Tracking and Accessing Emotional Experience

Trigger: When did this happen? What was it like in that moment? Take me there.
Felt Response: Where do you feel this? What is happening inside? What’s it like?
Attribution: What goes through your mind in this moment? If this feeling had words…?
Action: What do you do? What happens next?

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Access Points to Primary Emotion
Focus on process / making implicit → explicit

Visual cues: Nonverbal markers for emotional experience (e.g. sighs, shifts in posture, glances)
Auditory cues: Changes in vocal tone. (e.g. Incongruence, tone changes, soft, sighs)
Silence: May indicate processing of emotional experience.

Emotions and Attachment
Emotional expression defines the nature of attachment relationships: Responsiveness and accessibility.
Emotions are primary signaling system: Negative Interaction Patterns: Pursue / Withdraw
Emotional cues pull for responses: Sadness → Comfort; Anger/Protest → Review
Emotions prime core cognitions: Withdrawal → Fear of Abandonment → Needs / Wants

EFT Overview of Treatment

Stage 1. Cycle De-escalation

Assessment
- Therapeutic Alliance: Mutual goals, safe haven / secure base.
- Contraindications: Abuse, addictions, affairs, incompatible goals.
- Individual sessions: Strengthening alliance, individual assessment.
- Observe and assess: Couples predictable patterns.

Cycle De-escalation
Common Starting Point: Tracking a recent fight or argument from start to finish.
1. Track the emotional/attachment related drama - play by play.
2. Follow the steps the partners take – how the dance unfolds.
3. Tune into the music that is playing – reflect and validate experience.
4. Observe the process as it unfolds.

Tasks and Interventions
- Track and reflect patterns of interaction – Empathic reflection and validation.
- Access and expand emotional experience – Evocative responding, empathic conjectures, heightening
- Reframe experience in context of “the cycle” and the context of attachment. – Reframing and enactments of present experience.

Stage 2. Restructuring Interaction

Tasks
- Promote engagement with disowned attachment emotions – needs and fears and integrating these into relationship interactions.
- Help other partner to accept expanding emotional experience.
- Expand the emotional experience to include greater awareness and ownership of attachment fears, longings and needs. (Typically processing views of other and views of self)
- Integrate newly crystallizing attachment fears and needs into interactions that restructure the relationship towards a more-secure bond.

Key Interventions
- Empathic Conjecture/Interpretation: Tentatively moving to the leading edge of partner’s experience.
- Evocative Responding: Focusing on partner’s tentative or emerging “felt sense.”
- Heightening: Efforts to intensify specific emotional experiences in the moment. (RISSSC)
Restructuring Interactional Positions

- Withdrawer Engagement: Newly engaged partner shares his/her attachment needs and wants. Asserting her/his desire for a safe and secure connection.
- Blamer Softening: Softened partner asks for contact and comfort from a position of vulnerability. S/he asks for attachment needs and wants to be heard, comforted, and reassured.

Stage 3. Consolidation

Tasks

- Support couple in finding new solutions to past problems from a newly found secure base.
- Facilitate steps the couple can take to invest in their more responsive and accessible positions.
- Help the couple shape a story about their future together – given where they have come.

Common Challenges in EFT Practice

Common Challenges

- Progress in therapy has stalled.
- One partner moves to a more disengaged position.
- Therapist feels like s/he has taken sides / coalition.
- Therapist is looking to other models / interventions and has lost hope for change.

Common Reasons

- Lack of safety in the alliance.
- Therapist is ahead of the couple and is pushing the process.
- Past history of trauma or couple attachment injury.
- Therapist’s ability to provide a accessible and responsive relationship.

Responses

- Attend to the process – what is happening in the room making room for defenses.
- Assess attachment history – past trauma or relational injuries.
- Individual sessions with both partners – assess what may have changed.
- Seek consultation and supervision – self-assessment viewing tapes.

Selected References and Resources


The International Centre for Excellence in EFT: www.iceeft.com
The EFT Zone: www.theeftzone.com
The Chicago Center for EFT: http://chicagoeft.com

www.theEFTzone.com