

My, How Couples Therapy has Changed! Attachment, Love and Science

by Sue Johnson

Renowned family therapist Sue Johnson discusses Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFT) in light of new research on attachment in adult love relationships.

. . . Couples therapy is in the midst of a revolution. The key element in this revolution is the development of a new science of love and love relationships . . .

. . . Attachment theory states that we need a safe haven relationship to turn to when life is too much for us and that offers us a secure base from which to go confidently out into the world. This is effective dependency. Many psychotherapy clients learn that their problem is that they are too close or undifferentiated from loved ones. The approach discussed here offers a larger picture. The evidence is that secure, close connection is a source of strength and personality integration rather than weakness. Studies show that the securely connected have a more articulated and positive sense of self. . .

Secure connection is shaped by mutual emotional accessibility and responsiveness. This is the heart of the drama that plays out in the couple therapist's office. The fights that matter in a relationship are only superficially about the kids or money. Partners and therapists can spend many hours talking about these content issues instead of focusing on how the couple talk and more specifically, on the key attachment questions that drive a couple's negative dance. The key questions are: "Are you there for me?" "Do I matter to you?" "Will you turn towards me and respond to me?" Partners often do not know how to ask these questions, and therapists often miss them or even see them as a sign of immature dependency.

Attachment theory tells us that emotion and emotional signals are the music of the dance between intimates. Many therapies encourage clients to go round strong emotion or replace it with rational thoughts or decisions. Emotion researchers such as James Gross now tell us that this not only increases arousal in the person who is inhibiting emotion but also creates tension in the other partner. An approach that focuses on attachment suggests that emotion is best acknowledged and listened to, so that emotional signals can be shaped in ways that make for safe connection. New emotional responses are also essential if therapy is to address each partner's deeper longings, help partners formulate their needs and offer a path to the kind of compassionate loving connection that couples are seeking. Secure attachment, not just conflict containment, is the goal of couples therapy here. By the end of therapy, an EFT therapist, for example, wants to see his or her clients listen to their emotions, speak their needs clearly and reach for their partner in a way that helps that partner tune in and respond. Research into EFT outcomes tells us that when partners can do this in key sessions, they move into recovery from distress, and this recovery tends to be stable over time . . .

If you look through the attachment lens, the negative spirals that distressed couples create and are victimized by are all about separation distress—the deprivation and emotional starvation that comes from emotional disconnection. When we cannot get an attachment figure to respond to us, we step into a wired in sequence of protest, first hopeful and then angry, desperate and coercive. We seek contact any way we can. My client tells me, "I poke him and poke him—anything to get a response from him, to know I matter to him." If we cannot get a response, despair and depression come to claim us. This



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way of understanding the usual demand-withdraw cycle in a distressed relationship allows the therapist to help partners to see the game instead of the ball, and to come together against the common enemy of the isolation and the negative dance that is consuming their relationship. It also implies that unless the underlying attachment issues and primal panic is addressed, other approaches, such as insight or learning skill sequences, are unlikely to be effective.

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Shaping a sense of safe connection

If we cannot find a way to turn towards our partner and shape a sense of safe connection, there are really only two other secondary strategies open to us and they map onto two emotional realities with exquisite logic. Strategy one is to become caught in fear of abandonment and demand responsiveness by blaming; unfortunately, this often threatens the other and pushes this person further away, especially if this strategy becomes habitual and automatic. Strategy two is to numb out attachment needs and feelings and avoid engagement (and conflict), that is, to shut down and withdraw. Unfortunately, this then shuts the other person out. Both these secondary strategies are ways of trying to hang onto an attachment relationship and deal with difficult feelings, but they often backfire. Over the course of EFT studies and practice, we have been able to chart the emotional realities of partners as they use these strategies. Once they can order and name their feelings, blamers speak of being alone, left, unimportant, abandoned, and feeling insignificant to their partner. Underneath their anger they are extremely vulnerable. Withdrawers speak of feeling ashamed and afraid of hearing that they are failures. They believe that they can never please their partner and so feel helpless and paralyzed.

Attachment-oriented couples therapy

Attachment theory offers a map to the dance of love and the powerful emotions that move partners in this dance. In moment-to-moment interactions, cognitive models of personal identity are also shaped. Each person is defined and defines themselves as lovable or unworthy and the other as trustworthy or dangerous. The map offered here allows the therapist to go within each partner and between the partners into the dance and its patterns. The therapist then, with EFT attachment-based interventions, shapes new interactions and new emotions, helping partners move from desperate anger, for example, to a clear expression of fear and longing that evokes caring and compassion in the other partner and creates the contact they long for.

EFT as an attachment-oriented therapy assumes that reshaped emotions and emotional signals and new sequences of responsive interaction are necessary to transform an attachment relationship. Couples therapy has rightly, from this view, been accused of ignoring nurturance and connection for a focus on conflict management, power and boundaries. This approach addresses this issue as core to forging satisfying and meaningful relationships. Attachment longings are wired into our brains and the tendency to reach and to trust and to comfort and care are always there, even if unrecognized or denied. The tendency to respond to hurtful disconnection by shutting down or attacking is also always there, and can become habitual for all of us.

Bowlby, like Carl Rogers, saw how we can all get stuck in dead-end ways of dealing with our emotional needs and with loved ones, but also believed that we can have a corrective emotional experience of safe connection that opens new doors for us and changes these ways . . .

. . .When couples can reconnect (or even connect for the first time!) in this way, immensely positive bonding events take place. Partners begin to see each other more fully and are more authentic and compassionate with each other. Their connection empowers each of them and opens the door to all the benefits that research tells us comes with secure attachment. Their way of engaging with their own emotions, their loved one and the world, which now contains a safe haven, shifts.

So, yes! couples therapy has changed. It is changing into a rich scientific discipline that has a central place for love and attachment . . . This science of human connection changes everything, allowing us to reach into the space within and between us... for the better.