Emotionally Focused Therapy

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Introduction

Certified as an EFT therapist by International Center for Excellence in Emotionally Focused Therapy (ICEEFT)

Background with emotional work

Currently working with couples using EFT in group practice in Kensington, MD

Creative process of applying EFT to individuals and families
Emotionally Focused Therapy

- Founded in 1990’s by Dr. Susan Johnson, psychologist from Ottawa, Canada (other original founder Les Greenberg)
- EFT is an evidence-based couples therapy, as effective as CBT (or more)
- Theory and practice can be applied to therapy with families & individuals.
Theoretical Roots

1. **Family Systems Theory** (Minuchin, etc.)
   - Causality is circular
   - Task of therapist is to interrupt negative relational cycles so that a new pattern can emerge

2. **Experiential Therapy** (Rogers, Pearl)
   - Empathically reflecting and validating a person’s emotional experience
   - Foster new corrective emotional experiences that emerge from the “here and now.”
Attachment Theory (Bowlby, Ainsworth)

- People need close primary attachments “from the cradle to the grave.” (Bowlby)

- Secure bonds promote a person’s ability to regulate emotions, solve problems, think clearly and communicate effectively.

- An adult’s ability to create secure relationships is related to the attachment style they learned from their primary relationships as a child.
Attachment Styles

Bowlby found that from early in childhood, a person acquires a way of attaching to others:

- Secure attachment
- Insecure, Anxious attachment (pursue, blame)
- Insecure, Avoidant attachment (withdraw)
- Insecure, Fearful-Avoidant, (seeks and avoids closeness, associated with trauma history)

A person’s attachment style has a major impact on their adult relationships.

Attachment styles can change and become more secure.
Goals of EFT -- from EFT website

- To expand and re-organize key emotional responses—the music of the attachment dance.

- To create a shift in partners' interactional positions and initiate new cycles of interaction.

- To foster the creation of a secure bond between partners.
Role of EFT Therapist

- Create a safe alliance with the client
- Collaborate with the person on their goals
- Show genuine curiosity
- Focus on process, not content
- Allow and help emotions to emerge
- Be a “temporary safe attachment figure”
- Provide an “antidote” to traumatic messages
- Psycho-ed about attachment and its role in a person’s life.
EFT Process

- Identify and change the negative interaction cycle that has emerged between the partners
- Identify key un-met attachment needs that fuel the negative cycle
- Identify primary emotional responses that are underneath the perceptions and behavior in the relationship
EFT Process continued

- Shape new cycles of positive interactions, in which positive emotions arise and negative emotions can be regulated in new ways
- Create a secure attachment between the partners by creating a new emotional experience
- From the new place of security, rethink and solve previously unsolvable problems
Primary and Secondary Emotions

Primary Emotions:
- Joy
- Sadness (hurt)
- Fear
- Anger
- Disgust
- Surprise

Secondary Emotions:
- Anger
- Embarrassment
- Jealousy
- Shame (self-disgust, sadness, fear)
- Confusion
- Etc.
Relationship between Unmet Attachment Needs, Emotions, Perceptions and Behavior

Behaviors: Pursuing-Blaming, Withdrawing-Avoiding

↑

Secondary Emotions: Anger, Jealousy, Guilt

↑

Perceptions: “I’m not lovable,” “I’m going to be left”

↑

Primary Emotions: Fear, Sadness

↑

Unmet Attachment Needs: Love, Connection, Security
Negative Interaction Cycle

The Cycle
Scott R. Woolley Ph.D. ©

Partner Name: Pursuer/Withdrawer
Behavior(s)
Perception(s)
Secondary Emotion(s)
Primary Emotion(s)
Unmet Attachment Needs

Partner Name: Pursuer/Withdrawer:
Behavior(s)
Perception(s)
Secondary Emotion(s)
Primary Emotion(s)
Unmet Attachment Needs
3 Stages of EFT

1. De-escalation of negative cycles of interaction

2. Changing Interactional Positions

3. Consolidation and Integration
Nine Steps of EFT

Stage 1: De-escalation of Negative Cycles of Interaction

Step 1: Create an alliance and delineate conflict issues in the core attachment struggles

- Joining
- Relationship history
- Individual attachment history
- Assess for trauma (violence, abuse etc.)
Stage 1 – De-escalation

Step 2: Identify and track the negative interactional cycle
- Five elements for each partner: behavior tendencies, perceptions, secondary emotion, primary emotion, unmet attachment needs.

Step 3: Assess the unacknowledged emotions underlying positions
- Express some primary emotion to partner
Stage 1 continued

Step 4: Reframe the problem in terms of the negative cycle, underlying emotions and attachment needs.

- The cycle is the enemy, not their partner.
- Each partner understands the impact they have on the other (even unintentionally)

At the end of Stage 1 – partners can unlatch from negative cycle.
Stage 2 – Changing Interactional Positions

Step 5: Withdrawer Re-engagement

- Encourage expression of disowned attachment emotions, needs and integrate into relationship
- Go deeper (fear, sadness)
- Deconstruct shame (sadness and fear of not being lovable)
- Share these with partner
Stage 2 continued

Step 6: Promote acceptance of the partner’s experience and new interactional responses (pursuer responds to withdrawer’s emotions)

- Help pursuer hold onto the withdrawer’s experience without trying to change it or take responsibility for it.
Stage 2 continued

Step 7: Promote the expression of attachment needs

- Continue with Withdrawer
- Enactment: Facilitate expression of needs and wants and create bonding events that redefine the attachment between partners
- Once you have accessed primary emotion – expression of needs follows (i.e. I need to know you won’t leave if I’m not perfect)
- Process fear of reaching; validate the reaching, and encourage partner to reach back.
Stage 2 continued

- Pursuer Softening
- Repeat Steps 5, 6, and 7 with the Blamer taking the lead

At the end of Stage 2 – couple has a secure bond (positive interaction pattern). They ask for attachment needs to be met. See partner as a safe haven.
Stage 3: Consolidation and Integration

Step 8: Facilitate the emergence of new solutions to old relationship problems.
- Finally (yeah…) address content.
- Revisit on-going problems and help develop new solutions

Step 9: Consolidate new positions and new cycles of attachment behaviors
- Create new story of relationships
- Develop new rituals and ways to keep the new “dance” going
EFT Interventions with Individuals

1. **Empathic reflection** -- use tone of voice, repeat client’s key phrases “It’s like you are all alone.”

2. **Validation of emotions** -- “I can see you are really scared.”

3. **Track and reflect process** -- “When that happens, you tend to retreat, and then…”

4. **Evocative responding** (questions about feelings) – “What’s it like for you inside?”

5. **Heighten and expand** – “So you’re on edge, maybe scared…”
EFT Interventions continued

6. Empathic conjecture -- “I wonder if…”

7. Reframe negative interactions patterns in attachment language – “You withdraw because it hurts and you so much want to be close.”

8. Enactments: Restructuring and shaping emotional interactions. Therapist asks client to share emotion with partner.

9. Use of metaphor and images – “It's as if there’s a brick wall and you are feeling it come down.”

10. Provide an antidote to a person’s distress – “It was never your fault that the abuse happened.”
Resources

- Official EFT website: www.iceeft.com