Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT)

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Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy

- EFT: early 1980s by Susan Johnson and Les Greenberg
- Roots in humanistic and systems approaches
- Short term: 8 – 20 sessions
- Directed: 3 Tasks + 9 Steps
- Focuses on:
  - crucial significance of emotion
  - emotional communication in the organization of patterns of interaction and
  - emotion as a powerful and often necessary agent of change
Overview of EFT

• Three Primary Tasks of EFT:
  – Task 1: Creation & Maintenance of Alliance
  – Task 2: Assessing & Formulating Emotion
  – Task 3: Restructuring Interactions

• Nine Steps
  – 1 & 2: Assessment
  – 3 & 4: De-escalation
  – 5 & 6: Promoting Identification & Acceptance
  – 7: Change Events ~ Emotional Engagement
  – 8 & 9: Consolidation & Termination

Marital Therapy is Important Due to . . .

• The negative impact of divorce on couples, families, communities, and society as a whole

• The loss of “social capital” which has been linked to the escalation in levels of depression and anxiety

• The fact that many of us have no choice but to depend more and more on our intimate partners for support and connection

• The fact that EFT ultimately helps the renew and reinforce the ‘Partner Connection’
Research Indicates . . .

- A direct correlation between
  - intimate relationships + social support + physical + psychological health = effective immune system functioning + amelioration of life stress & trauma
- A strong loving relationship
  - supports individual growth and self-actualization
- Confiding in others
  - has positive effect on the cardiovascular system
  - aids in preventing adverse effects of aging
- “Cuddle hormone” oxytocin
  - appears to protect individuals from disease

EFT Helps Because . . .

- Good effect size:
  - 70-73% recovery rate from marital distress in 10-12 sessions
  - 90% rate of significant improvement
- Stable results after treatment termination
- Replicable
- Very effective with traditional couples and with men who have trouble with withdrawal and difficulty in expressing emotion.
- Research based
Strengths of EFT

• Based on clear, explicit conceptualizations of marital distress and adult love
  – conceptualizations are supported by empirical research on the nature of marital distress and adult attachment
• EFT has been applied to many different kinds of problems and populations
• EFT is collaborative and respectful of clients
  – combines experimental Rogerian techniques with structural systemic interventions

Strengths of EFT

• Integrates intrapsychic focus with interpersonal focus:
  – Intrapsychic = how individuals process their experiences, particularly their key attachment-oriented emotional responses.
  – Interpersonal = how partners organize their interactions into patterns and cycles.
• This secure bond is the ultimate goal of EFT:
  – Intrapsychic realities + interactional dance have to be reprocessed and reorganized if the couple is to attain a positive emotional bond
Role of the Therapist

- **NOT a coach** teaching communication skills
- **NOT a “wise creator of insight”** into the past and/or future
- **NOT a strategist** employing paradox or problem prescription

- **IS a PROCESS CONSULTANT** who helps the couple reprocess their emotional experiences of the relationship
- **IS a CHOREOGRAPHER** who helps the couple restructure their relationship dance
- **IS a COLLABORATOR** who follows and leads the therapeutic alliance

Basics of EFT

**TASK 1: Creation and Maintenance of a Therapeutic Alliance:**

1. **Empathetic attunement ~**
   - Relationship Between Therapist and Partners
   - Curative in and of itself (Rogers, 1951)

2. **Acceptance ~**
   - Therapist honors and prizes clients
   - Therapist has actively validating stance

3. **Genuineness ~**
   - Therapist must be real and present

4. **Continuous active monitoring**

5. **Joining the system ~**
   - Therapist engages Partners AND the relationship
Basics of EFT

TASK 2: Assessing & Formulating Emotion

1. Reflection ~
   - Focuses and directs the client’s attention
   - Sharpens client’s grasp of the experience
   - Slows down the interpersonal process

2. Validation ~
   - Reassures that both partners are entitled to their experiences and emotional responses

3. Evocative Responding: Reflections & Questions ~
   - Bypasses superficial issues and calls on emotions
   - Allows clients to explore and reprocess experiences

4. Heightening ~
   - Helps partners engage in experiences in a new way

5. Empathetic Conjecture/Interpretation ~
   - Extends & clarifies experiences so that new meanings occur

6. Self-Disclosure ~
   - Builds alliance and intensifies validation of client’s responses
   - Not a large part of EFT

Basics of EFT

TASK 3: 1st Part of Task = Assessing / Reformulating Emotions

- Tracking and Reflecting Emotion
  - Focuses on and clarifies the nature of the relationship
  - Tracks, identifies, and elaborates on the cycles of the partner’s interactions

- Reframing Emotions
  - Places each partner’s behavior in the context of the other’s response
  - Interactional responses are framed in terms of underlying vulnerabilities and the attachment process
  - Anger is framed as attachment protest
  - Withdrawal is framed as fear
  - The cycle is framed as the enemy and the problem
Basics of EFT

TASK 3: 2nd Part of the Task
Restructuring Interactions:

1. Enacting Present Positions So That They May Be Directly Experienced and Expanded
   • Capture the impasses in a relationship interaction &
   • Make these impasses accessible for modification

2. Turning New Emotional Experience Into a New Response to the Partner
   • 1st step in creating a new positive dialogue
   • Helps modify partner's positions

3. Heightening New Responses
   • Draws attention to unusual negative patterns
   • Creates a new kind of partner engagement

4. Choreographing Change Events
   • Therapist gives step-by-step direction and structure
   • Couple creates own dance as an expression of self

Typical EFT Session: Part 1

Monitoring the alliance
• “I sense this process is difficult for you. Is there some way I can be more supportive?”

Reflecting secondary emotion
• “And you get very angry when this happens, because it feels like such a no-win situation. I understand (to the other partner) that to you the anger seems to come out of the blue.”

Reflecting underlying emotions
• “So, what it’s like is, there is a kind of panic when he turns his back, is that right? And you feel it right now—as he turns away from you.”

Validating present responses
• “I think I’m starting to understand. For you, ‘shutting down,’ as you call it, is your natural way to cope. In fact, it has protected you all through your life, so when alarm bells go off, it just comes up as the only thing to do.”
Typical EFT Session: Part 2

Validating newly experienced underlying emotion
• “It is very hard for you when you hear your wife say that you’ve disappointed her. You might seem impervious, but in fact it’s like a knife in your heart. It hurts so much that you do numb.”

Evocative responding
• “What happens when you hear your wife talking like this, John? When she talks about feeling cornered and confined. How do you feel as you listen to her say this?” or
• “What happened right there, Alan? Mary said that she has never felt taken care of in this relationship; then you closed your lips and folded your arms across your chest.” or
• “What does that part of you – the part that told you never to open up – to never get hurt again – what does that part tell you right now?”

Typical EFT Session: Part 3

Heightening
• “Can you say that again, Evan: ‘Where are you? I can’t find you.’ Can you look at her and say that again?”

Engaging in empathic conjecture
• “I’m not sure I quite understand. Is it like, if she doesn’t desire me every day, I’ve lost her. That’s the signal I rely on to reassure myself that she’s still here, that she wants me. Is that it?”

Tracking and reflecting interactions
• “What just happened here, you said . . . And then you said . . . ?”

Reframing each partner’s behavior in the context of the cycle
• “So this is dangerous ground for both of you right now. You feel that you have to protest; protest how distant Jim is, but actually that scares you, Jim. It adds to your sense that you’d better find a place to hide, yes?”
Typical EFT Session: Part 4

Reframing each person’s behavior in the context of attachment needs
• “When you do this, what you call ambush, it’s like you have to get him to respond, to know that you do have an impact and that there is still a relationship, a connection, is that it?”

Restructuring interactions
• “So can you tell her that, Tom, can you tell her, I don’t know how to come and be close, I don’t know how.”

EFT Therapists are Taught to:
• Hold a client with his or her voice
• Keep clients in the present moment
• Invite clients to engage with their experiences on a deeper level
• Combine safety and engagement
• Create a powerful emotional experience
• Contact and engage clients with difficult emotions
• Use RISSSC (see next slide)
RISSSC Acronym is Useful

- **Repeat**: key words and phrases
- **Image**: capture and hold emotion in a way that abstract words cannot
- **Simple**: words and phrases
- **Slow**: pace enables emotional experience to unfold in a session
- **Soft**: voice soothes and encourages deeper experiencing and risk taking
- **Client’s Words**: adopt clients’ words and phrases in a validating way

STAGE 1: Steps 1 & 2

- **ASSESSMENT**: “Defining the Dance and Listening to Music”
- **Delineation of conflict** issues
- **Identification of negative interaction** cycle that maintains distress and precludes secure bonding
- **Sessions’ Goals**:
  - Connect with partners
  - Assess nature of the problem and relationship
  - Assess partner’s goals and agendas
  - Create therapeutic agreement
Interventions at this Point

- **Empathetic Reflection**
  - Reflect the experience of the relationship
  - Reflect the sequences of interaction

- **Validation**
  - Convey the message that their emotions and responses are legitimate and understandable

- **Evocative Reflections and Questions**
  - Focus on unclear aspects and clarify perceptions

- **Tracking and Reflecting Interactions**
  - Focus on behavior sequences that define the relationship and reflect attachment issues

- **Reframing**
  - Superficial level at this level
  - May describe the couple’s cycle

Couple Process & End State

**Steps 1 & 2**

- **Desired Outcome**
  - Both partners feel understood & acknowledged by therapist

- **Summary** includes description of struggles already engaged in and won

- **Therapist is an accepted partner** in the creation of a more loving relationship

- **IF Therapist DOES NOT recommend EFT:**
  - Couple given feedback and diagnostic picture
  - Explains why EFT is not being offered
  - Discuss other forms of help and referrals
Steps 3 & 4

• WORK TOWARD DE-ESCALATION: “Changing the Music”
• Accessing unacknowledged feelings underlying interactional positions
• Reframing the problem in terms of the negative cycle and underlying feelings and attachment needs

Sessions’ Goals:
• Access primary emotions
  – that are usually excluded from individual awareness
  – that are not explicitly included in partners’ interactions
• Use these emotional responses & attachment needs
• Expand the context of the couple’s problems
• Frame the problem in terms of the way couple interacts

Interventions at this Point

• Validation
  – Validate emotional states and legitimate responses
• Evocative Reflections and Questions
  – Open up and expand emotional experiences ~ repeat phrases, offer images and metaphors, ask questions
• Heightening
  – Encourage couple to enact key problematic and emotional responses that organize interactional positions
• Empathetic Conjecture
  – Encourage partners to process experiences one step further
• Tracking & Reflecting Patterns & Interaction Cycles
  – Place each partner’s response into other’s behaviors
• Reframing Problem in Terms of Contexts & Cycles
  – Formulate the problems into couple’s patterns of interaction
Couple Process & End State

Steps 3 & 4

- Desired Outcome =
  - Step 3 ~ Attachment issues emerge and begin to be clarified
  - Step 4 ~ Couple has picture/story of patterns that define their relationship
- De-escalation ~ first order change
- Reengagement
- Softening
- Partners engaged in new kind of dialogue about emotions, attachment issues, and cycles

STAGE 2: Steps 5 & 6

- DEEPENING ENGAGEMENT ~
  - Step 5 = Promoting identification of disowned attachment needs and aspects of self as part of relationship
  - Step 6 = Promoting acceptance of partner’s experience and new ways of interacting
- Sessions’ Goals:
  - Disowned emotions
  - Empowerment
  - Expanded sense of self
  - Expanded sense of interactional position
Interventions at this Point

• **Evocative Responding**
  – Use vivid, specific, concrete language, particularly images and metaphors, to assist in encapsulating experience

• **Heightening**
  – Emotion
  – Present and changing positions
  – The enactment of a present problematic position
  – The enactment of an emerging new position

• **Empathetic Conjecture**
  – Expand and clarify experiences
  – Frame difficulties partners might have in responding to changes in their spouse

• **Restructuring Interactions**
  – Shape interactions to include new experiences and interactions

Couple Process & End State

Steps 5 & 6

• **Desired Outcome**
  – **Intensification and heightening** of emotional experience
  – **An owning of this experience** as belonging to the self (not created by the other)

• **Reprocessing** of primary emotions

• **Attachment behaviors begin to change**

• **Partners see each other as being different**

• **Partners are engaged in new dialogue**

• **Partners hear each other take responsibility** for the position taken in the relationship
Steps 7 & Change Events

- EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT
  - Enactments
  - Bonding
  - Step 7 includes
    - Facilitating expression of needs and wants
    - Creating emotional engagement

- Sessions’ Goals:
  - Less engaged partner = withdrawer reengagement
  - More critical partner = softening
  - Partners are able to present specific requests
    - Pulls the other toward them
    - Maximizes the possibility that other will respond

Interventions at this Point

- Evocative Responding: Reflections & Questions
  - Focus on emerging experiences to clarify wishes/longings and to clarify expression of these to partner

- Empathetic Conjecture
  - Help symbolize longings and lessen sense of deprivation

- Tracking and Reflecting the Cycle
  - Reflect new, more positive changes and cycles

- Reframing
  - Place difficulties in the frame of their experience of the negative cycle

- Restructuring Interactions
  - Choreograph a request and heighten a positive response
Steps 8 & 9

- CONSOLIDATION OF A SECURE BASE
- The Termination Phase
  - Step 8 = New solutions to old problems
  - Step 9 = Consolidating new positions
- Sessions’ Goals:
  - Partners more accessible and responsive
  - Better problem solving strategies
  - Fosters safety and trust
  - Leave therapy non-distressed and able to maintain emotional engagement

Interventions at this Point

- Reflection and Validation of New Patterns and Responses
- Evocative Responding
- Reframing
  - Frame new responses as alternative to old cycles:
    - “The way we used to be”
    - “The way we are now and can be in the future”
- Restructuring Interactions
  - Focus and comment on new positions partners take
  - Summarize restructured interactions
  - Help couple create their own summary of new interactions
Couple Process & End State
Steps 8 & 9

- Desired Outcome = CHANGE
  - Intensification and heightening of emotional experience
  - An owning of this experience as belonging to the self (not created by the other)
- Reprocessing of primary emotions
- Attachment behaviors are changed
- Partners see each other as being different
- Partners are engaged in new dialogue
- Partners hear each other take responsibility for the position taken in the relationship

Web Site = www.eft.ca