

What is Emotionally Focused Therapy?

EFT views helps address the core questions inside that we ask in our relationships. "Do I matter to you?" "Can I count on you?" "Will you be here for me when I need you." These are important questions because they are typically at the root of what we are really fighting about: the emotional bond in the relationship. When we fear what the answer might be that we are alone, it can seem as though we are fighting for survival. This is why merely learning "communication tools" will not lead to a lasting intervention and many couples relapse into their negative cycle after completing skill based therapy; no emotional shift has occurred so when emotions get high, the mindfulness to use tools goes out the window. Using Gottman's research along with Emotionally Focused Therapy, we can make sense of the patterns, break them and collaborate together to create new positive ways of being with each other.

Using EFT as a model for couples counseling means we can understand with confidence what's happening in your relationship. EFT gives us the tools to heal and strengthen your connection. The process we will go through takes a reasonable number of sessions and might not always be easy, but we'll get through it together and most couples do fine. In fact, research studies find that 70-75% of couples move from distress to recovery and approximately 86% show significant improvements, compared to 35% for the next most effective model.

Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) is a short term (typically ten to twenty sessions), structured approach to couples therapy formulated in the early 1980's by Dr. Sue Johnson and Dr. Les Greenberg. EFT is also used successfully with individuals and families. EFT is an "evidence based" model meaning that a substantial amount of research on the effectiveness of EFT exists. EFT gives us an understanding of a destination in therapy because it includes a theory of love and what a secure loving relationship looks like from an emotionally attached perspective.

EFT is being used with many different kinds of couples around the world in private practice, university training centers, hospital clinics and many different cultural groups. It works well with partners who are shut down emotionally as well as finding themselves angry and hurt. These distressed couples include partners suffering from disorders such as depression, borderline personality disorder and chronic illness. In fact, EFT can be very effective when one of the partners suffers from PTSD.

"There are now empirically validated patterns of marital distress and road maps of adult bonding to help the therapist journey with a distressed couple toward a more stable and satisfying relationship."

- Sue Johnson

Steps in Emotionally Focused Therapy

Steps 1 and 2 Determine where you are at and the negative cycle

Steps 3 and 4 Lower the conflict so you can reconnect

Steps 5 and 6 Understand the deeper emotions and how they show up

Steps 7 Create real change events that re-engage and soften

Steps 8 and 9 Consolidate the new positive patterns

During a session in EFT therapy, you will not find me merely being curious about the past, providing "communication" tools or trying to negotiate a new relationship between partners. As an EFT therapist I will be helping you see the negative cycle that hijacks your interactions and makes you a victim of deep emotions. Then together we will illuminate these emotions and needs, help structure the relationship as a safe place to express your needs and wants and together you and your partner will strengthen your emotional bond.

A short sample of EFT in action

In a counseling session, one who sees their partner get angry and typically goes distant to avoid a fight, now has a chance to get in touch with a deeper understanding of them self; a sense of being intimidated and feeling helpless and how that drives their emotions and reactions. Once past this point, they assert their need for respect in the relationship and also becomes more emotionally and physically responsive and accessible to their partner.

During this process they shifts from "There's no point in talking to you. I don't want to fight" to "I want to be close to you. I want you to give me a chance. Stop jabbing me and let me learn how to be there for you." This is a profound shift.

The other partner's criticizing and anger can ease as they feel the new responsiveness and accessibility they have always craved. They can move into the realization that there is loneliness, fear and sadness underneath the anger. From this softer place, they can ask for what they need and at the same time offer comfort to their partner.

The angry partner shifts from "You just don't care about me. You don't get it." to a softer "This is so difficult for me to to say . . . I need you to hold me and reassure me. Can you do that for me?"

New patterns that lead to a closer bond start to occur and replace negative patterns, well documented in couples live. These happier patterns become self-reinforcing and create permanent change. The relationship becomes safe; a healing environment for both partners. In future moments of difficulty, couples now find that they move toward each other for soothing and comfort, instead of apart.

Therapist Role

While the therapist may provide some tools for communicating, the truth is that it is emotion that drives the patterns in the relationship. "Emotion is the music of the dance" as Dr. Johnson often says. Thus when emotions and reactions are high,

communication tools often get tossed out the window.

We may fight over money, parenting and sex, but down deep the emotions driving the reactivity are all about our emotional bond. "Are you there for me?" "Does my pain matter to you?" EFT deals with these primary emotions to de-escalate conflict and get at the heart of the matter. EFT helps people believe their partner hears and cares about their distress and needs, then facilitates actual change in the cycles of the relationship.

As an EFT therapist, I am not a communication teacher, I will not help you negotiate a problem away, I'm not a wise mystic with insight into your past, I do not not employ paradoxes or offer problem solutions. As an EFT therapist, at heart, I am a consultant who helps partners reprocess their experiences in the relationship, especially the emotional part and helps choreograph a new relationship dance. The EFT therapist collaborates, sometimes following, sometimes leading, never telling partners how their relationship should be.

A Few Strengths of Emotionally Focused Therapy

- EFT's approach is based on clear understandings of marital distress and mirrors the research of John Gottman that emphasize the significant role of emotional communication in the development of relationship distress.
- EFT is experiential. We do not simply talk about problems or solutions, together we actually create new experiences of the relationship.
- EFT is collaborative and respectful of clients combining a strength based view of people along with structured interventions.
- Key moments in the change process are mapped into nine steps and three key change events that help bring you closer in your relationship. There is a road map we follow to arrive at a secure place.
- EFT has been validated by 20 years of empirical research.

EFT has been applied to many different kinds of problems and populations around the world.