

*Shaping Close and Emotional
Bonds with Your Partner*

~ A Collection of Articles ~



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I. INTRODUCTION

The world of couple's therapy has been forever changed by the thorough research and the development of Emotionally Focused Therapy by Dr. Sue Johnson. Undoubtedly, a countless number of marriages and relationships can trace their reconciliation and reconnection back to the influence of her ideas. There are no adequate words to express the gratitude I feel for what she has done, both on a personal level, and as a counselor who seeks to put her proven theories into practice each and every day. There is a hope and a knowledge that couples no longer have to remain estranged and distanced, but they can successfully navigate through conflict and deep hurts to come through stronger on the other side.

I know I speak for myself and other EFT counselors when I say thank you Dr. Johnson for your countless contributions to the fields of psychology and therapy. You're an inspiration and a motivating factor in continuing to help marriages reconnect for both clients and counselors. And a personal thank you for taking time out to be a guest on The Couples Expert podcast. I know my nationwide audience benefited from your message about connection and your willingness to answer questions they sent in. Creating those lasting connections really is the way to wonderful and solid relationships.

II. TALK as a Turn On

Having just come back from the June Sex and Attachment conference in NYC, I was thinking about how we go for the sensational and the exotic in our public conversations and miss the obvious simple down to earth realities that truly define our sex lives.

A fellow presenter pointed out that at a certain point in our lives – probably around 30 – the only time we make love is late at night when we are already exhausted. The audience roared with recognition. On the way home on the plane, I thought of my client couples and the myriad of couples I have seen over the years when supervising other therapists or watching research tapes of sessions. One simple fact emerged. Couples, whether 25, or 55, don't, won't, can't talk about their own sex lives!!

The irony is of course that we are now so open about sex. Sexual images, stories and recipes for how to reach the big O are everywhere. But it is impersonal sex that plasters our billboards. When sex is up close and personal, it seems that many of us are as inhibited as a 1940's traditional couple. How can this be?

The answer is obvious. What is missing from all the commercialized sizzle sex is – emotion and vulnerability! Context matters! The music of the sex dance matters and the music many couples are dancing to in bed is fear of rejection or abandonment. In the work we do, using an approach called Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), we see that once partners feel safer and more connected, they can actually communicate about their sex lives. And this makes – all – all – all – the difference. As their emotional connection improves, their ability to be sexual with each other expands exponentially.

As I have said elsewhere, good sex is an intricate act of responsive co-ordination and attunement. Hard to do when most of your attention is caught up with monitoring for incoming threats and reaching for your armor. Good sex requires opening up and being able to share what feels good, what is arousing, what turns you off and what moments are truly satisfying for you. Good sex starts with taking the risk to talk.

When we have the safety to share this, then we can tune into our own arousal cues and those coming from our lover.

The simple take home here is – take care of your emotional connection first – then go to the sex manual for ways to play. Great sex is a safe adventure – like a ride on a zip line.

III. Sue Johnson: To help returning soldiers, support their families

Once again, stories of soldiers who come safely home to Canada, only to be destroyed by their emotional wounds, are in the news. Now we have specific numbers. At least 59 Canadian Forces members took their own lives after returning from Afghanistan.

It is not news that many soldiers have chosen to die rather than to struggle through the constant battle that is post-traumatic stress disorder. This may be horrifying, but it is not news. It is common knowledge that, in the last 40 years, more Vietnam vets have died by their own hand than ever died fighting that war.

This kind of tragedy happens to our policemen and first responders too. Last year, Cpl Ron Francis from the RCMP, was found dead of apparent suicide. Before he died, he reported to the National Post that he and others suffered because there was no proper program to address PTSD for the police, and no “proper information for their families.” He added, “People are dying, because there is no proper backup.”

As a psychologist who has worked with those suffering from PTSD in many settings, I think he is right.

Francis specifically referred to families and, for me, this goes to the heart of the matter. We seem to be focusing more and more on drug therapies and offering soldiers more superficial coping strategies, such as teaching them to try to suppress negative thoughts, while ignoring the most vital healing resource of all, maintaining emotional connection with those they love. Over the years, warrior after warrior has told me clearly, their partner is their lifeline, their bulwark against despair, their remaining source of joy and safety. After a few sessions, my client, Jamie, tells me that he and his wife can stand together against the dragons that come for him in every nightmare; he can now call for her and she knows how to calm him and hold him until the panic subsides. This is the

soothing that our human brain is wired for. This is the best antidote we have to the helplessness of trauma.

We are not talking here of romantic sentimentality; we are talking science. We now know that the loss of connection with loved ones plays a key role in triggering and perpetuating almost all mental health issues. No matter how brave we are or how much training we have, human beings are just not designed to face dragons alone. Safe connection heals. After 9/11, a study by one of my colleagues found that some survivors who had been close to the towers were doing very well 18 months later, while some had some or all of the symptoms of PTSD. The difference lay in whether these survivors had at least one close trusted other to confide in, to take comfort in and to call when their nervous systems vibrated with the horror of that day. Being able to count on a few trusted others makes all the difference. It is clear that the very best predictor of personal resilience is ability to take one's armour off and be comforted by a loved one. Simply educating partners and including them in the treatment plans of chronic anxious individuals has been shown to double the positive impact of treatment.

Many years ago the U.S. military attempted to recognize this reality by creating brief couple education programs for their soldiers returning from deployment. My colleagues and I were asked to design one such program and feedback from military families was extremely positive. But in the end the program was offered only occasionally. As one soldier told me, "The old adage is, 'If the military thought you needed a wife, they would have offered you one.' They just don't see how important this connection is. Without her beside me, the ghosts would have eaten my soul."

Just last year in Canada, a brave military wife, Jenifer Migneault, made news when she accused the Veterans Affairs Minister, Julian Fantino of "forgetting" military families. Recently, in the Globe and Mail, she pointed out that this minister offered service dogs and volunteers to aid in filling out forms to vets, but no support to the military families who suffer with their loved ones and who are their best resource in healing.

The other obvious and potent reason for supporting, educating and including partners in intervention is that PTSD symptoms, such as numbing and hypervigilance, are toxic for any relationship. Without support, a trauma survivor's relationships often fall apart just when the survivor needs them the most. Emotional isolation is the most potent trigger for suicidal or aggressive behaviours.

The most painful irony here is perhaps that over the last two decades, Canadian mental health professionals such as myself have outlined and tested clear protocols for working with couples dealing with traumatic stress. We know how to do this, but my experience is that our help is often turned down. It seems that enhancing the stability of our warrior's closest relationships is not yet seen as a necessary part of post deployment support, or treatment for trauma. I have been told personally by military personnel, "The men do not need this."

Ron Francis, Jenifer Migneault, and the hundreds of couples my colleagues and I have treated and run educational programs for over the years do not agree with them. PTSD is a many headed monster and to tackle it, we need all the resources we can muster. We need to not only, as Francis suggested, be better at "informing" partners about this illness, but also to actively help those who are wounded shape the secure family bonds that tame this dragon. We have the science and the expertise to do this – to help couples shape the support that only a loved one can give – shelter from the storm and a reason to fight on. We must now offer this support to those who serve our country and our communities

IV. The #1 Way To Build A Stronger Connection With Your Partner

This is the time of year when we make promises to ourselves. Promises about how we'll make this new year different than the last one. We vow to go to the gym more or eat less cherry pie.

If it's health and happiness we're after, we would be better off deciding to improve the quality of our most intimate relationship. I can hear you say, "Well, I'm already pretty splendid in my love relationship, so this has to be a personality change pill for my partner." Or, "No-one really knows how to do that."

But there is one thing you can do, something that has the power to move you and your partner into a whole new kind of dance. Therapists and researchers have now identified the one key ingredient – the make-it-or-break-it element that, more than any other, defines our love relationships. In our institute, we watch as couples who are giving up on their relationship learn about this element and learn to use it to turn hurt and chaos into caring connection. It is, of course, the ability to be emotionally open and responsive.

When we can move into the emotional channel and tune into our partner's emotional cues and show how these cues move us, this IS the connection that builds love relationships.

We know this deep in our bones; that this is the magic that makes love what it is. A child runs to us, eyes wide with fear. We move closer, bend down, let ourselves feel in our own body what we see on his face, and we say softly, "It's OK. I am here. Are you scared? No need to be scared."

The child holds onto us for a moment; then, he smiles.

Simple? Sentimental? Perhaps. But the science of bonding says this is a moment of safe connection that build bonds that last a lifetime. This is the kind of moment that answers the key question in love relationships: "Are you there for me?"

To use an example: Peter tends to withdraw when he senses that Annie is hurt and disappointed in him. This leaves Annie so alone that she is permanently disappointed! What blocks Peter's ability to respond reassuringly? His fear – the one we all have that makes us so vulnerable in

love, the fear of rejection and abandonment. So he moves like lightning into self-protection and turns away.

Imagine what happens when Annie and Peter can slow down and talk about how afraid they both are, and how they trigger each other into a kind of primal panic. Imagine the magic that happens when Peter turns back and says, "This is the moment when you feel that I am indifferent, uncaring, isn't it? I don't want to turn away and leave you feeling alone. I want to help you with that feeling so you know how important you are to me." He moves closer, bends down, softens his voice and invites Annie into a safe haven of connection.

These are the moments that spark love, renew love and keep love strong. When couples do this, they shape a connection that transforms their relationship and keeps it strong for years to come.

There are no substitutes for this emotional responsiveness. Partners try to offer intellectual advice, " Why don't you do your meditation when you get upset, then you won't get so hurt?" or practical help, " I know you're mad at me. Would you like me to do the shopping?" But it is the emotional support and connection that works and keeps love alive.

It does take courage to tune into and try to respond to our lover's emotional messages when these messages spark our own anxieties. It helps to remember that we are exquisitely sensitive to our lover's emotional signals, both positive and negative, simply because we are bonding animals whose deepest need is to belong with another. I suggest that Peter remember, when he feels powerless to please Annie and is dismayed by her anger, that she is angry precisely because his comfort and support matters so much to her; to remember that his turning and responding has the power to pull her into loving connection.

In the session, Peter jokes with me; "You mean, all I have to do is keep the emotional channel open and respond on this level, even if all I can say is "I don't know what to say but I don't want you to hurt and I am going to stay here and try to respond," and we will turn into the lovers in the storybooks?"

I look at Annie. She gives Peter a huge million dollar smile. "You got it sweetheart," she says, "just be there for me; that IS the story – the whole story."

We can all make sense of love and what we understand we can shape. Let's make the coming year our most connected yet.

V. Love is a Dance

There are only so many dances in a love relationship.

The happier we are, the more fluid and varied the dance with our partner is. We feel safe together so we improvise and play.

But do you notice that, when we fight, the dance is always the same? It is narrow – small – not many moves. We feel like we have no options. The negative pattern takes over the relationship.

Luckily, we all get stuck in the same places, so we can chart how lovers miss each other. We know that once you learn to SEE the moves, the dance, the pattern, and see how it plays out, you can chart a way out. The best way is to recognize the vulnerable emotions that shape each person's steps.

Here is familiar stuck place.

Him: *Lets make love.*

Her: *Well, I haven't been feeling that close – connected.*

Him: (Rejected) *So now, I guess, we have to talk about feelings ad nauseam. (Long silence)*

...

Her: *Well – we can have sex if you want, if you are going to be all huffy about it.*

Him: *No – I am not interested in going through the motions.*

Her: (Rejected) *Oh, so now I offered and you are turning me down –out of spite. We are so out of sync here.*

Him: *We are always out of sync. Why can't you just respond when I reach for you?*

Now both stare at the ceiling in frozen silence. Both feel unseen and dismissed.

Mutual hurt and triggers protective responses, but protection becomes a prison.

If you can change the lens and see the dance, not get totally caught up in your own vulnerability or anger, you can acknowledge your mutual vulnerability and change the music.

Him: Wait a minute. This is that thing where we both feel rejected – we miss each other. I feel kind of rejected here and like I failed. Do you feel rejected too?

Now a whole new conversation opens up. New safer moves are suddenly possible. Both partners help each other with their softer feelings and everything feels safer. Simple. But difficult if you are not used to looking at the dance – the pattern between you.

You have to step back and see the dance or you are both married to The Rejecter and that is a world of pain.

VI. Is Marriage All About The Skill Set?

Do you need to hone your communication and problem solving skills to stay married?

Is honing your relationship skills, such as active listening, the best way to hold onto the joy in your relationship? Probably not says a new study by Ronald Rogge of the University of Rochester and his colleagues. This is a pity! After all in all the magic and chaos of love the idea of actually having a technique that will give you some control is appealing. Mostly teaching skills came out of the idea that couples had to learn to stop punishing behaviours and turn on rewarding behaviours if they were going to keep their emotional bank account flush. So just teach them how to do this!!

We have known for years in fact that there is no evidence that happy couples, or even unhappy ones who have learned skills as a solution to distress, actually use these skills in their day to day life. There are also questions about just how unskilled people are to begin with? I am always blown away when distressed partners who constantly break all the rules of good communication in my couple sessions, show exquisitely honed listening and empathy skills with my receptionist. But then she doesn't hold their heart in her hand. She is pretty safe. My sense is that this is an access problem not an acquisition problem. I have honed my skills over 30 years of practice in psychotherapy but the skilled part of me goes off line when I am in battle mode with my husband.

Perhaps practising "skills" happens on the wrong level. You have to have a certain cognitive distance and awareness of your performance to be skilled, say at dancing tango. Except that you can't really dance a good tango while you are figuring out the steps in your head! You have to feel the emotion in the music, the beat and tune into your partners moves. I have seen partners following the steps in a skill sequence with deliberation while their partner sits and weeps. He is saying the "right" things but they don't move her and she feels alone with her emotions. I have also hear partners say, "You don't mean that. You are just going through the motions to get me to back off. Your face looks really angry." The skilled responses don't see real and they don't always match the nonverbal cues we are sending.

Emotional turmoil scrambles the performance of any "skill", particularly the turmoil of fear. When your survival is at stake the niceties of communication seem irrelevant. What I and my

colleagues usually do with couples in distress is to help people make sense of their turmoil and their fears of being either rejected or abandoned. When partners can name their emotions, we know (Matt Lieberman's research) that this calms the emotional centers in their brain. When they experience confiding emotions like fear to their lover and having their lover help them with this – soothe them- then all their cognitive and perspective taking skills come back on line. So Matt moves from apparent ignorance to expert in about 8 minutes. It goes like this: "Don't know. Don't want to talk. You are too difficult. Forget it", to "Maybe I get hurt, kind of rejected. Feel like an idiot. Can't talk," to "Feel like I am losing you. It freaks me out and scrambles my brain," to "I need some support here. Give me a chance to come close. I don't want you to hurt but I need you to stop with the list of flaws. Then I can turn and come to you."

In Rogge's study, women perceived declines in emotional support and men and women reported affection had declined even when they and their partner had been taught specifically over 15 hours how to give support and affection. When small children are rewarded with a toy for doing behaviours that are just supposed to feel good anyway, like helping someone, they stop the behaviour. Interesting, maybe if my lover tells me I am special because this is what we learned in the program then it doesn't feel like it coming from his inner feelings; it seems like it's about the program he is running, not about me. It feels phoney to him too, so he stops doing it. Love and affection have to be genuine and felt to feel good.

Maybe empathy and openness -feelings of love can be caught but not taught. If we understand love and how vulnerable our lover is to our signals – we can change their heart beat, hormone release and immune functioning in a moment – we are MOVED naturally to feel for them and respond lovingly. We can help lovers change the emotional music of their dance and prime natural feelings of love and compassion.

The truth is, the new science of love tells us that we can have more control over our love relationships – but learning set skills isn't the way to do it. We have to learn, in real interactions, how to send the heart messages that touch our loved one and move them to care. The results for this one are pretty good. We call it a Hold Me Tight conversation.

You can read about it in *Love Sense: The revolutionary new science of romantic relationships*.

VII. Why Emotionally Focused Therapy May Save Your Relationship

How to get results in your relationship that will last.

Some say EFT stands for extremely funny therapy, but actually it stands for Emotionally Focused Therapy — a short-term approach (only 8 to 20 sessions with a therapist) that gets great results solving problems in your relationship.

EFT started in the 1980s and developed alongside the new science of love and bonding. The EFT therapist uses this science as a guide in every session so he or she knows how to get to the heart of the problem fast. We don't teach communication skills or focus on how your family history has impacted your relationship so much as help you really see the dance you get into with each other and the emotional music that plays and keeps you stuck in conflict.

We help you make sense of your powerful emotions and your relationship needs, and talk about these things in a safe way. No one has to be the bad guy; all relationships reach sticky points. We also help you know that it's ok to have relationship needs. Often we don't feel entitled to our needs or can't quite articulate them in a way that our partner can hear.

There are three stages to the EFT process.

Stage One You learn to step out of painful patterns so that you can both feel safe again.

Stage Two You learn how to reach for your partner in a way that helps them respond and come closer. We can all learn to make sense of our feelings and express them in a way that pulls our partner towards us. At this point, we also help people heal wounds such as affairs. Our research shows that EFT is successful in helping couples struggling with these kinds of injuries move into forgiveness and renewed trust.

Stage 3 Focuses on consolidating your gains so that you can continue to handle differences well and find your way. Here we ensure that you don't just have a satisfying relationship, but a truly loving bond.

We work with all kinds of couples, including those who struggle with problems other than relationship distress, such as depression or problems with anxiety. If there has been violence in

the relationship, we have to do a thorough assessment to make sure that both partners will feel safe in our sessions and able to openly explore their relationship issues.

In the last 15 years, we really have discovered the rhymes and reasons of romantic love. And now that we understand it, we can shape it. Love relationships do not have to be hit and miss or a matter of luck anymore. We all need a loving connection and more and more of us are learning how to make that happen.

VIII. It's Time To Stop Fighting And Start Showing The Love

Don't get stuck in a spiral of fighting about the same things again and again.

People in love who come to see me to repair their relationship often tell me that they really don't understand why they are fighting all the time about seemingly small issues.

Helen, for example, complains that Ned "never" does the tasks around the house on time. "He said he would fix the cupboards by Wednesday, but he didn't do them till Thursday night" she repeats for the twentieth time. Ned tries to explain and defend himself and then gives up and lapses into silence. Frustrated by his silence, Helen begins again. Each states that the other is "too difficult."

They also suggest other reasons for their conflict; Ned sees a "power-struggle," while Helen sees believes that they are just too different to be compatible.

As the therapist, I see a different explanation. I see a pattern of frustrated demanding and distancing defense, which has taken over their relationship leaving them both feeling alone, rejected and abandoned. I ask them to see their behaviour as a loop that they are both responsible for and to not just focus on what their partner does to them. I tell them that we all get stuck in this particular spiral at times and that it is like a demon that eats relationships. They need to stand together to see how this demon makes them both unhappy.

Then I ask them to look a little deeper and really listen to each other. Helen realizes that she feels that Ned does not care about her emotions and seems to ignore the difficulties they are facing in the relationship. Her nagging about housework is her attempt to make him confront those larger issues. Ned, on the other hand, realizes that he does turn away from Helen because he feels like he can never please her. She always seems to be angry at him and so he shuts her out so that he doesn't have to face the pain of her harsh words. Helen talks about her fear of being deserted when she finds out that she doesn't matter to Ned, and Ned shares the pain of rejection he feels and how it makes him constantly wary of getting too close to Helen.

This couples start to recognize their pattern of disconnecting from each other and feel that they can help each other step out of it and learn to connect again. They can now explore their relationship and the impact they have on each other.

This is more than pragmatic agreement or a de-escalation of conflict. This is the beginning of safer connection. Each partner understands that criticism and shutting down and shutting a person out hurts the other one. In fact, this kind of emotional pain is coded in the same place in the brain as physical pain. Chronic fights are always about the pain of disconnection; after all, we are bonding animals who need closeness.

The next week, Helen tells me, "we have a name for our pattern — The Suspicion Spiral. I think Ned doesn't need me cause he is distant and he thinks I don't think he is good enough because I nag him. Last night, he said, 'we are in the SS thing — I don't want you to feel like I don't care,' and he put his arm around me." She beams; I guess they fixed the fight.

IX. The Power of Authenticity

A Path Toward Deeper Intimacy

By: John Amodeo PhD, MFT

We long for acceptance, love, and connection. But oftentimes we don't know how to create it. In fact, we often push away the love we long for.

Love and intimacy don't blossom by trying to pull it toward us or manipulating people. Connections thrive as we create a climate that's conducive for them. Love and intimacy have a greater opportunity to grow as we cultivate a climate of authenticity.

Being authentic in relationships is easier said than done. It requires that we tend closely to our actual felt experience. Rather than defend and protect ourselves, it means finding the courage to allow ourselves to be vulnerable and then show that to a person we want to be close to.

Dr. Eugene Gendlin, whose research led to the approach known as Focusing, found that clients who made the most progress in psychotherapy (despite the orientation of the therapist) were those who were contacting and speaking from their actual felt experience. They paused, stammered, and groped for words or images to describe their deeper experience rather than just talking from their heads. Things shifted and opened up as they stayed with their authentic experience from moment to moment.

Apply this principle to relationships: When we share what we're experiencing with each other, intimacy is more likely to arise. Dr. Sue Johnson, the primary developer of Emotionally Focused Therapy for couples (EFT), invites couples to contact and share what they're really feeling and wanting — and she helps clients find the words to convey this. Through the power of such authenticity, conflict often yields to deeper connections.

Couples may enter my office complaining that they're having a communication problem. Although there is often truth in this, more fundamentally, they are usually having a self-

awareness problem. They are in touch with their anger, their blame, and their perceptions about their partner (they're selfish, insensitive, or bad), but they're not connected to the tender feelings and longings beneath their criticisms and accusations. And they're not skilled at communicating their authentic experience in a sensitive, respectful way.

Blaming and analyzing others pushes them away. It doesn't create the safety necessary for deep communication. It covers up what they're actually experiencing, which is usually something more vulnerable, such as sadness, fear, or shame — or a longing to connect in a deeper way. Finding the courage to contact and convey this deeper experience, perhaps with the help of a couples therapist when necessary, is a key to resolving conflicts and creating a climate for a richer, more vibrant intimacy.

There are layers to our authentic experience. Being authentic means taking the elevator down inside ourselves and noticing whatever we happen to be experiencing right now. It may change from moment to moment.

For example, we might be authentically feeling anger. As we stay gently present with that rather than act it out, it might shift into something else. We might notice sadness beneath the anger, or an unmet need for kindness and closeness. If we can be patient with ourselves — allowing the time necessary to uncover what most authentically lives within us—we can then share *that*, which might invite our partner toward us and create a richer, more fulfilling intimacy.

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

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

The revolution

Just a few short years ago couples therapy was cynically labeled as a set of techniques in search of a theory! Now researchers such as John Gottman and Kim Halford have suggested that even the accepted techniques of this field, such as teaching problem-solving and conflict-management skills, while beneficial, do not seem to get to the heart of the matter in terms of offering a pathway to lasting change in relationships and do not reflect how happy couples relate to each other outside of therapy.

If all this weren't rough enough, everyone agrees that couples therapy can be very difficult to do. Dealing with two people, two sets of hot emotions, escalating fights, and clients who hurt but don't want to slow down, be more reasonable and negotiate is not for the faint of heart.

Given all this, it seems almost reasonable that couples therapy is often ridiculed or maligned as ineffective in the media. But in spite of this, millions of couples persist in seeking out therapists, perhaps because, as recent surveys tell us, most people in North America rate finding a loving relationship as their main life goal, placing it ahead of career or financial success. It is fortunate, then, that the image of couples therapy painted above is not the whole story. In fact, this image is simply out of date.

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. As Yogi Berra told us, "If you don't know where you are going, you wind up somewhere else." Without a clear model of love and the process of connection and disconnection, it is difficult to know how to focus interventions on the defining issues and moments in a relationship. It is hard to know what changes will really make a difference and what the overall goal should be in couples therapy. If love is, as Marilyn Yalom in her book *The History of the Wife* suggests, "an intoxicating mixture of sex and sentiment that no

one can understand," then couples therapy is just appropriate sitcom material. As she suggests, sex and emotion do seem to be intrinsic to love, but it does not have to be a complete mystery.

There are many strands in this new science of love relationships, but they all come together in the growing literature on adult attachment, a relatively recent extension of the English psychiatrist John Bowlby's work on the emotional bonds between mothers and children. The attachment perspective gives the couples therapist a meaningful and effective map to the drama of distress between partners. It guides the therapist in the pivotal moments in couples interactions and why they matter so much; it offers the therapist a guide to each partner's deepest needs and strongest emotions. Even so, most therapists will ask, "But does it tell me what to do from Love is a very special kind of emotional bond, the need for which is wired into our brain by millions of years of evolution. The key questions are: "Are you there for me?" "Do I matter to you?" "Will you moment to moment in a couple session?"

Many streams of research and theory have addressed these questions of late. My colleagues and I have explored these questions in what we call Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT), a systematic, rigorous, tested set of interventions based on the attachment view of love and bonding. I recently summarized attachment-based approaches in a manner that can be offered to clients and the public in *Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love*. The great strength of this new scientific perspective is exactly that it offers a rigorous body of observation and research into what love is all about and how it changes shape and color. Moreover, it is a tested approach to intervention with excellent outcome data and clinical relevance. Clients also tell us that this way of seeing and working does indeed go to the heart of the matter. In this article I will summarize the attachment perspective and how it is supported by different strands of relationship science (these science strands will be in italics to find or avoid, as you wish!) and how it translates into practice in EFT.

A new scientific and practical theory of love

The multitude of studies on adult attachment that have emerged over the last decade tell us that the essence of love is not a negotiated exchange of resources (so why teach negotiation skills?), a friendship, Nature's trick to get you to mate and pass on your genes, or a time-limited episode of delusional addiction.

Love is a very special kind of emotional bond, the need for which is wired into our brain by millions of years of evolution. It is a survival imperative. The human brain codes isolation and abandonment as danger and the touch and emotional responsiveness of loved ones as safety, a safety that promotes optimal flexibility and continual learning. *Jaak Panksepp¹, in his neurobiological studies, finds that loss of connection from attachment figures triggers "primal panic," a special set of fear responses. As Bowlby notes, the words "anxiety" and "anger" come from the same etymological root and both arise at moments of disconnection, when attachment figures are non-responsive. This need for emotional connection is not a sentimental notion. The basic image of who we are and what our most basic needs are, namely that we are social animals who seek such connection, is reflected in health studies. For example, it is now clear that emotional isolation is more dangerous for your health than smoking, and that it doubles the likelihood of heart attack and stroke.*

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. Eighteen months after 9/11, researcher Chris Fraley² found that securely connected survivors, who could turn to others for emotional support, were able to deal with this trauma and grow from it, whereas insecurely attached survivors were experiencing significant mental health problems.* 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. 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. Studies show that over 7 out of 10 couples reach this in EFT. Safe emotional connection then helps each partner deal positively with stress and distress, whether this stress arises from within or outside the relationship. Negative events then only make a relationship stronger. Jim Coan found that when women in an MRI machine were shown a sign that meant they might be shocked on their feet, their brains registered a high stress response, especially if they were alone and even if a stranger held their hand. But if they felt loved in their marriage and their husband held their hand, then these women's brains were much calmer and the shock seemed to hurt less; holding hands with a loved one "calms jittery neurons" in the brain. As Bowlby predicted, there is more and more evidence that lovers are connected by a neural net. They regulate each other's physiology and emotional lives. When they are tuned in emotionally, they help each other reach a physical and emotional balance that promotes optimal functioning.

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 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.

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 What has to happen—or what is necessary and sufficient for a lasting transformational shift to occur in a distressed relationship? 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. What has to happen—or what is necessary and sufficient for a lasting transformational shift to occur in a distressed relationship? My experience leads me to believe that a corrective emotional experience of safe connection that is then integrated into the self and the relationship is necessary. What does this look like?

We know from thousands of studies on attachments between mother and child and from studies of adult love that in secure relationships that people can become aware of and regulate their attachment emotions, accept their needs and express these needs coherently and openly to the other. They can accept comfort when offered and, in an adult relationship, offer comfort to the other. They can then use this sense of felt security to move out into the world, to explore and learn. In key change events that predict positive outcome in the second stage of EFT, when the therapist is guiding the couple into positive cycles of engagement and trust, this is also what we see. With both withdrawers and blaming anxious partners, the therapist helps them move into a deeper connection with their own fears and longings, and then express these fears and longings to their partner in a way that pulls the other close.

Withdrawers assert their needs for safety and can tell their lover what they require to stay emotionally engaged. David says, "I have to feel that I can win here. I can't be walking on

eggshells and get doubted and slammed every day. I want to be close. I need your help and a little trust from you." More blaming partners can express their fears and also risk reaching for their partner. David's wife, Sue, can say, "I am so scared of being let down, Emotional presence and engagement are the keys to sex that remains thrilling, rather than seeking novelty or needing distance to spark desire of going into freefall, but I need your reassurance. I have to know that I matter to you—that you will not let us lose each other."

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. *The research on bonding suggests that as they make this kind of connection, lovers are likely flooded with the cuddle hormone, oxytocin. This is released during orgasm, breastfeeding or simply when attachment figures come close to us. Oxytocin is also linked to the release of dopamine, a natural opiate linked to pleasure, and down-regulates cortisol, the stress hormone. The neurochemical basis of bonding—the physical source of the calm euphoric feeling associated with love—is no longer a mystery.* Once a couple can create these kinds of interactions, they can move into the final consolidation phase of EFT.

The practical application of attachment and associated research findings also leads into exciting new areas. It leads to a new understanding of how to create forgiveness for injuries in attachment relationships. A seven-step process has been outlined and tested (Johnson, 2004). New research also gives the therapist a guide to the integration of sex and attachment, helping us to understand Laumann's recent survey results that the most satisfying sex occurs in long-term loving relationships. The passion of infatuation is perhaps just the hors d'oeuvre rather than the main meal. Emotional presence and engagement are the keys to sex that remains thrilling, rather than seeking novelty or needing distance to spark desire (see the chapter on this in *Hold Me Tight*). A new understanding of love also extends the reach of the couples therapist. EFT is used to create safe-haven relationships for those who are traumatized. If we can heal relationships, we can also create relationships that heal. A safe, loving relationship is the natural antidote to the emotional tsunami of trauma.

Sam and Kate: An EFT couples session

Let's now look at some interventions in a small piece of couples therapy and see how all of this impacts the choices the therapist makes in a session. Kate and Sam are an older couple who have been very wounded in past relationships. Kate was wounded early by Sam's reluctance, for the first few years of their relationship, to commit to her. He needed an "escape route," to the point where she would feel humiliated and excluded by him, especially in social situations. They have come a long way. Sam is now expressing commitment and caring, but Kate just cannot bring herself to trust him and move in with him again. This session focused on addressing that impasse. Below is a list of a number of the interventions used and some examples of therapeutic interactions with Sam and Kate.

- Validation is used to create a safe haven in the session for both partners.
- Emotions are tracked, unpacked, and tied into key steps in the couple's drama.
- Responses are framed and clarified within the new understanding of attachment.
- Profound core emotions are heightened and evoked to move partners into new, more responsive interactions.
- New enactments are shaped to help partners move into interactions where each one of them can reach for the other and respond caringly to the other.

Sam: We are fine and then we are not. She just gets so upset. It's like, "Go to jail, do not pass Go" for me. It's disheartening. Then I get scolded about all the past injuries and crimes. (He shrugs and throws up his hands.)

Therapist: (*Chooses to focus on process—Sam's emotions and how they move him in the attachment dance.*) You feel disheartened, and like you are being scolded. Kind of hopeless, then? So then, what do you do here? Is this one of these times when you, as you have said, try to "explain," give reasons for past actions, and end up "stepping back" a little? (Sam nods and so does Kate.) That must be so hard for you, Kate. (*Therapist actively reflects this couple's attachment pattern, validates and empathizes to create a safe haven in the session.*)

Kate: I still don't feel heard. I was expendable to him—I am hurt

New research on hurt finds that is it a mixture of anger, sadness and fear—the fear of being excluded, abandoned and rejected.) We have talked lots but it doesn't change. And then we went to that party on Saturday and then we fought. The hurt goes on forever. So I just say, "Just

leave." (*She weeps bitterly.*) Some days I see that he is struggling to be there, but . . . then we just withdraw from each other. I can't trust and he just gives up on us. Therapist: Some days I see that he is struggling to be there, but . . . then we just withdraw from each other. I can't trust and he just gives up on us

Therapist: Some part of you sees that he is fighting for you, (she nods). But these moments--this hurt is still triggered and hits like a tsunami (heightening primary attachment emotions). The hurt is sadness? (She nods). There is some anger, and a terrible sense that this is unbearable. The only answer is for him to leave and you to protect yourself, not let him in? The hurt will go on and on--that is the scary part.

Kate: Yes. It's sad and it's terrifying. I will never feel safe here. I can't risk with him.

Therapist: (*Using the map of attachment emotions.*) There is a panic. Can you feel that fear right now? (*Kate murmurs that she does.*)

Kate: It's like I am in freefall.

Sam: I try. I try to tell you that I am here, that I want you to come to the party with me. I know that in the past parties were like a minefield. I know I kept you at arm's length. Now I try to reach out to you, but you don't trust it. So what can I do? (*He again throws his arms up in the air and turns away.*) You are so attractive, so competent. You are dangerous for me too.

Therapist: Sam, I want you to stay here right now—not turn away and get discouraged. I know it's hard to be holding out your hand to Kate and have her not able to really reach out and take it. That takes courage. But can you see that she is scared? Lots of past hurts and fears are right there for her in these moments. (*His fears are validated and Kate's responses are clarified in the light of attachment vulnerabilities.*) Can you tell her, "I want you to be with me at the parties; I want to reassure you and have you take in my caring, feel safe"? (*Highlighting the attachment message, the invitation, coming from Sam.*)

Sam: (*Turns to Kate*) Yes. Yes, I am reaching from my heart. (*He puts his hand on her arm.*)

Therapist: Kate, can you feel Sam's hand on your arm? (*She shakes her head.*) You can't feel the warmth in his hand? (*She shakes her head again.*) You are so scared that you go numb, is that it?

Kate: I go numb. At the party the other night, I was numb. So scared that the old scenario would play out. He would move away; act like I wasn't his lady. My facade works but underneath . . .

Therapist: You are just so very scared of being hurt again, of feeling unimportant, expendable. *(Kate nods.)* So you numb out. You can't feel his warmth then. You can't take in his reassurance. Then he gets discouraged and begins to express hopelessness and that confirms your fear. Can you tell him, "I am so very scared of letting In this connected state, two particles vibrate together and move into exquisite coordination, a natural synchrony of matching rhythms and responses, where intentions and moves are transparent and perfectly anticipated. myself hope, of beginning to feel and need you again"?

Kate: *(To Sam)* I am just so scared. I want to believe that you are with me now, but when we do stuff like go to a party, all that old hurt comes up and I just numb out. Then when you do touch me, it's like you are a million miles away.

Therapist: How can Sam help you, Kate? How can he help you with your fear, your doubt? *("Don't know," Kate murmurs.)* Can you look at him? Do you see that he cares, that he doesn't want you to be hurt or afraid?

Kate: *(Looks at Sam intently.)* Yes, I see that. I need him to listen to that old hurt I have and help me with it. I need him to help me heal it and to reassure me that it is okay to begin to put my trust in him again. *(Suddenly she smiles and he moves closer and smiles back at her.)*

Sam: Well, then that is what we will do. I am not sure quite how to do it, but here I am. *(She leans forward and folds herself into his shoulder.)*

In this moment, Sam offers Kate a felt sense of connection, and I see the neural duet that researchers describe when they speak of mirror neurons firing in the brain so that we feel within our bodies the moves and emotions of another. This sense of felt connection seems to create a state of resonance that physicists speak of. In this connected state, two particles vibrate together and move into exquisite coordination, a natural synchrony of matching rhythms and responses, where intentions and moves are transparent and perfectly anticipated. This kind of engagement can be seen in joyous moments between mother and child, father and child. It is also part of these moments between adult lovers such as Sam and Kate. This is perhaps the essence of love. So, yes! couples therapy has changed. It is changing into a rich scientific discipline that has a central place for love and attachment. We have reached into outer space, to Mars and beyond.

This science of human connection changes everything, allowing us to reach into the space within and between us... for the better

XI. RESOURCES

WEBSITES

- <http://www.drsuejohnson.com>
- <http://ottawacitizen.com/news/national/to-help-returning-soldiers-support-their-families>
- <http://www.yourtango.com/experts/dr-sue-johnson-professor/>
- Mikulincer, Marion and Shaver, Phil (2007). Attachment in adulthood. Guilford Press.
- Johnson, Sue (2008). Hold me tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love. Little Brown. (Or visit the Hold Me Tight website)
- <http://www.psychologytoday.com>
-

Shaping Close and Emotional Bonds with Your Partner

~ A Collection of Articles ~

by Sue Johnson

