

Emotionally Focused Therapy for Distressed Couple Relationship Susan M. Johnson, Ed. D., Professor of Psychology and Director of Ottawa and Ottawa Couple & Family Institute.

Distress in close relationships is one of the main reasons North Americans seek health services. This may be due, in part, to its association with other common problems, such as clinical depression. For example, depression is about 25 times more likely to occur in a person with a distressed relationship.

Divorce, with accompanying family disruption, is extremely common, with about half of all marriages ending in divorce. Reasons for divorce and for distress in close relationships have been studied. The way a couple interacts with each other is very important in determining the success of a relationship or marriage. Criticism and complaining coupled with defensiveness predicts poor relationships. Emotions and how they are expressed is also very important. For example, facial expressions such as anger on the face of the woman and fear on the face of the man are associated with divorce. Couples who are able to soothe each other and understand each other's emotions are less likely to have serious conflicts and to be able to repair rifts in the relationship. Emotionally focused couples therapy (EFT) focuses on this knowledge of the importance of emotions in a relationship. EFT attempts to have adult couples "open up" to each other. It also teaches how to respond to the other person's emotions in the most effective way.

Treatment Comparison: Ninety percent of people who participate in EFT significantly improve. About 70-73% report recovering from relationship distress. Studies have shown that EFT works better than other couples therapy methods. For example, using cognitive behavioral therapy in couples is associated with only a 35% recovery rate.

EFT works best when both members of a couple are willing to participate. It also works better in couples whose female member still feels cared for by her partner. The severity of the distress before therapy starts does not seem to affect the outcome of EFT. Even couples with severe problems can benefit from this treatment. If there is violence in the relationship, however, EFT is not indicated. EFT has been used with success in many different kinds of clients. Gay clients, depressed and traumatized clients, and clients of different cultural groups have all had success with EFT.

Treatment Description: EFT is a brief intervention, lasting between 10 and 12 sessions. However, if there are additional problems, the number of sessions can be increased. For example, 30-40 sessions are common with couples dealing with traumas. Emotion and how it is expressed between partners is the key component of EFT. In other words, EFT views emotion as the "music of the dance between partners".

EFT focuses on the attachment model of love. This model views a positive, stable marriage as a safe haven and a secure base. When a partner feels like he or she has lost the connection with his or her partner, problems arise. There may be anger followed by anxious or clingy behavior. Criticism is often an attempt to get a partner to respond emotionally. Emotional accessibility and responsiveness are the key features of a secure bond. When responsiveness is missing, partners may either become more anxious and demand attention, or may try to distance themselves to avoid painful feelings. The way couples interact with each other provides the EFT therapist with information about their relationship.

The goal in EFT is to uncover negative emotions. This will lead to describing hurt feelings, fears, and longings that the couple may have difficulty expressing to each other. The therapist encourages partners to deal with their emotions in a positive way, sharing softer feelings and needs.

The three stages of EFT include:

1. Identifying the negative cycle of interactions, such as demand-withdraw. Couples are also asked to examine the connection between their problems and underlying emotions. These emotions generally are rooted in being afraid of losing the bond shared with the other.
2. The therapist supports each partner to put into words their deepest feelings, especially their needs and fears. The other partner is helped to hear, accept and respond to these messages. This creates more safety in the relationship so that both partners can reach out, pull the other closer and depend on the other.
3. The therapist helps the couple discuss how they will maintain this new sense of connection and consolidate the changes they have made in therapy sessions, bringing them into their everyday lives.

The EFT therapist usually will ask questions about the couples' behaviors and thoughts. For example, an EFT therapist may ask, "What is it like for you when he 'shuts you out?'" The therapist may also make comments about the couple's behavior such as, "You throw up your hands - is that like helplessness?" The therapist helps the couple understand how they interact with each other and how to reframe their negative interactions. Helping the couple feel safe in asking for the things they need from each other is a key part of this therapy.

Dr. Sue Johnson is Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry at Ottawa University and Director of the Ottawa Couple and Family Institute. Until recently she was also the Director of the Couple and Family Clinic at the Ottawa Hospital. She received her doctorate in Counseling Psychology from the University of British Columbia in 1984. She is a registered psychologist in the province of Ontario, Canada, and a

member of the editorial board of the Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, the Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy and the Journal of Family Psychology.

She is one of the originators and the main proponent of Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFT), now one of the best validated couples interventions in North America. In the past years she has authored books on EFT, Emotionally Focused Therapy for Couples (1988, Guilford Press) with Leslie Greenberg and The Practice of Emotionally.