

Emotionally Focused Therapy

A Christian Perspective

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Marital Therapy is the most difficult of therapies

- Stuck in a room with a couple fighting, blaming each other and asking you to be the referee
- Teaching communication skills and solving disagreements does not pump life back into a marriage
- Key to a healthy marriage is whether or not a couple can:
 - *emotionally connect *turn toward each other
 - *be a source of comfort *face difficulties of life as an 'us'
 - *repair hurts and re-connect

KEY: PERCEIVING MARRIAGE TO BE A SAFE HAVEN

Every Couples' Counselor Needs

- A **theology** of relationships
- A **theory** of love to make sense of why and how couples get stuck
- A **map** and guide to provide a clear sense of what to focus on & change
- A set of **interventions** to bring about change

God's Heart: Love Well

1. Greatest Command is to Love (Matthew 22:37-9)
2. Loving well is key to thriving in life (I Cor. 13)
3. We impact our whole life and each other by the way we love (Galatians 5:13) (Immune system compromised or strengthened)
4. Loving well requires Character, growing our soul (Colossians 3:10-14)

Attachment Theory

- We form an attachment bond with significant others
- From birth to the grave we need love
- Building blocks to a safe haven
 - * proximity
 - * choose, committed, cherish
 - * trustworthiness
 - * available emotionally and physically
 - * responsive in caring, considerate ways
 - * repair

Disconnection is traumatizing and triggers separation distress

Marital Distress

- Event triggers alarm “you are not my safe haven”
- Attachment fears, vulnerabilities and insecurities arise
- Stress Response triggered
- Absorbing states of negative emotions arise
- Fuel negative reactions: fight, flee, freeze, tend & care
- Repair attempts fail
- Patterns make safe emotional engagement and caring responses difficult keeping couple protesting and protecting
- Rigid interactional patterns set in: pursue, withdraw, freeze

Fight Cycle



Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy

- * 20+ years of research – most researched marital model
- * 70 – 75% success rate
- * 90% ‘significant improvement’
- * It works because it gets to the heart of a couples conflict = emotionally connect & foster safe haven, despite differences
- * Safe Haven Model = EFT Integrated with Christian principles, highly effective

Tasks Of EFT

1. Be a safe haven for the couple (alliance)
2. Access, Expand, Reprocess Emotional Experience
3. Create new interactional patterns that
4. Foster a safe secure attachment bond

MOVE 'WITHIN' AND 'BETWEEN'

1. Look '*within*' each spouse to see how each person is constructing their emotional experience of relatedness
2. Look at the system, what happens '*between*' the couple and how the partners relate and engage each other

Use Emotion to lead us to vulnerabilities and change

“To change people, start where they are” = Kierkegaard
“Emotionally Corrective Experience” (Frank) rather than
“Teaching”

- Emotions inform us of our world, give our world its meaning, powerfully organizes and *moves* us to respond
- Can't change emotion that is not up and running
- So get couple to re-create experience in the room, feel it in the moment, not just talk about it cognitively

What emotion to focus on?

- Focus on the most vivid aspect of the experience - watch for non-verbals
- Focus on emotions that are related to attachment needs and fears
- Focus on emotions that play a role in organizing negative interactions
- Acknowledge the 2ndary emotions - access & process the primary emotions

Overview of Process

- Develop an alliance, identify cycle, identify and access underlying emotions, and work to de-escalate
- Engage the withdrawer
- Soften the pursuer/blamer
- Create new emotional bonding experiences and new cycles of interaction arise
- Consolidate new cycles of trust, connection and safety, which enables a couple to face the difficult issues from an 'us'

Stage One:

Cycle De-escalation

1. Assessment – get to know the couple really well and care about them
2. Identify negative cycle – who does what when how
3. Access underlying attachment emotions – what do they feel when they are pursuing/withdrawing/push-pulling
4. Frame the distress in term of the cycle + attachment + needs +fears

Stage Two:

Restructuring the Bond

5. Access and Process fears, dragons, view of self and other, needs
6. Promote acceptance of each other's new experience
7. Structure emotional engagement as they express attachment needs

Stage Three: Consolidation

8. Solidify the new positions and cycles, find solutions to hot issues while remaining emotionally connected
9. Confirm growth, give hope for the future, narrative for 'testimony'

Step One: Assess & Connect

- * Get to know the couple
- * Care about them
- * Relationship & Attachment History
- * What is it like to be in the relationship

Stance of Therapist

- God Fearing - Couple is on holy ground – about God’s work in the lives of couple
- A guide, Process coach - Be well-trained & skilled – what is the Lord doing in couple’s life, task is to help them ‘become.’ Honoring –no need to pathologize, Jesus would leave the flock for this person,
- Couple is an expert on their experience, be inquisitive, “do I have it?” “help me here” “am I getting it?”

Interventions

- Listen - with your body, face, heart
- Empathic Attunement - connect with their experience
- Ask clarification questions - 'help me understand...'
- Ask open ended questions - get them to explore how they are feeling & needing - not think of the right answer
- Empathize - show you care & a safe haven
- Tracking and reflecting - follow the process & patterns
- Use your tone of voice, body language, word choice to make it safe for them to share

Step Two: Cycle/Dance

1. Who does what when and how, if they feel the bond is threatened?

1. Who pursues? Who withdraws? Freezes?

“And then what happens when you say/do....?”

“I feel alone in the relationship so I yell and tell him he never helps me around the house, he just walks off”

What you will hear

Pursuer

“He is never there, I am not a priority to him”

“Everything falls on my shoulders”

“He just doesn’t care, he just says, ‘oh’ and walks away.”

Withdrawer/Freezer

“I can never please her or do it right enough.”

“I don’t bother, why, what’s the point? She sees me as bad and I can’t change her view of me.”

Step Three: Underlying Emotions

Acknowledge & validate the secondary emotions that fuel the cycle

Access the primary emotions that are out of awareness & not included in interactions

Access the dragons & vulnerabilities triggered

Expand emotional experience: numb to fear, anger to sadness

Expand Emotional Experience and Identify the more vulnerable Primary Emotions

Withdrawers present as defensive, withdrawn, shutdown, stoic

-he fears her disapproval & criticism, and shuts down his feelings and hides. He feels rejected, not good enough, fear of failure

Pursuers present as always angry, upset, demanding, going after

-she is sad & hurt and fears he doesn't care and she is not worth the effort. She feels alone, abandoned, desperate, unimportant

Step Four: 'Makes Sense'

Reframe the relationship problems in terms of:

1. Protesting/protective emotions arise when
2. The bond doesn't feel safe
3. Which sets in motion a cycle
4. That hinders close emotional connection
 - yet each long to be connected to the other

Purpose of the Cycle

Distance = an effort to protect oneself, move to safety,
move away from the pain, hurt

*-he pulls away hoping to hide the deep hurt of inadequacy
and failure from her attack*

Pursuit = effort to close the distance so to re-connect, to
find the other & bring them close, to get the other to
see, hear, understand

*-she pursues seeking re-assurance for the fear that he no
longer cares about her and he is not there for her*

Tracking Reflecting Cycle

Example: *"So what just happened here? It seemed like you turned from your anger for a moment and reached to him. Is that right? Jim, you were paying attention to her anger and stayed behind your barricade, yes?"*

Main functions: Slows down and clarifies steps in the interactional dance; replays and clarifies key interactional processes.

Reframing Cycle in Attachment Terms

Examples: (a) *"You freeze because you feel like you're right on the edge of losing her, is that right?"* (b) *"You freeze because she matters so much to you, not because you don't care."*

Main functions: Shifts the meaning of specific responses, clarifies their attachment significance, and fosters more positive perceptions of the partner.

Heart of Conflict

- At the heart of all couples is the longing to be loved
- When a spouse doesn't feel their spouse is a safe haven
- Alarms sound
- In an effort to get the partner to restore the bond
- When efforts fail to restore the bond, the alarms keep sounding
- Rigid interactional patterns fueled by absorbing states of negative emotions are set in motion

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Part Two

EMOTIONALLY FOCUSED THERAPY

WITH

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TIME FOR CHANGE

- THERE COMES A TIME IN A MARRIAGE WHEN PROTECTING IS MORE PAINFUL THAN RISKING TO BE VULNERABLE

Process Of EFT

1. Identify the cycle – *“who does what when”*
2. Access the emotions – *“what do you feel when that happens?”*
3. Attachment significance – *“do you turn toward or away?”*
4. Access and process vulnerabilities under the protesting/protecting – *“what’s within & deeper?”*
5. Allow the new experience of self to shift their position so they are more engaged, open, real
6. Create new interactions so they can connect on this deeper, softer, more vulnerable level

Stage Two:

Restructuring the Bond

5. Promote identification with disowned attachment emotions, needs and aspects of self, and integrate these into relationship interactions
6. Promote acceptance of each other's experience and emerging new positions
7. Facilitate expression of needs and longings and create emotional engagement and experiences that foster emotional connection , comfort and care

Withdrawer Engagement

Pursuer Softening

1. A husband's placating and withdrawal expands into vulnerability and fear. With a new sense of himself, and from a place of vulnerability, he asserts his need for respect and he becomes more accessible to his wife.
2. The wife's critical anger expands into fear and sadness. Sense of self, needs and fear of being vulnerable processed, and she can then ask for and receive comfort.

Each spouse takes a new position with their partner & this new position invites the other to turn toward and for each partner to be accessible and responsive, which reorganizes their interactions.

Step Six: Promoting Acceptance

The spouse shares his new experience (newly accessed emotions/fears/longings/needs) & observing spouse:

i. I have not heard it before

ii. how can I trust it iii. how do I react to it

iv. what does it mean about me

“This is hard for you to take this in? It is all new, even strange. It doesn’t fit your years with her?”

“It’s risky letting your guard down and believe it, you fear this change won’t last & you will only be hurt again.”

Withdrawer Engagement

1. Owns his way for dealing with his fear (close up)
2. Realizes his fear of being close (self worth)
3. New feelings arise regarding:
 - a. His position in the relationship
 - b. Experience of himself – truth about himself
4. Presents new side of himself, new position
5. Evokes a new kind of response from her

T. R. A. C.

- Truth: Accesses and processes emotional experience. Processes fears, vulnerabilities. Finds the truth about himself, how God views him and who he is... this new sense of self shifts his position in the relationship
- Reach: He can reach for his spouse, turn toward and share himself – be vulnerable as he express hurts, fears and needs
- Ask: He can share his longings and needs and ask for them to be met in a centered congruent manner
- Center: With a new sense of self, from a new position, he can be a source of comfort, he becomes a safe haven for spouse

Withdrawer Engages

- I go numb & walk on eggshells because I feel helpless, not good enough, can't change your view of me (takes responsibility for his reactions & cycle)
- I am fearful (shares more vulnerable experience)
- I long for you to value me (longings arise)
- I can't come out of my castle & come close when you attack me that way (needs expressed)
- The truth about me is that I am valuable, capable (new sense of self and new position arises)
- I would like to be with you, can I hug you (reaching)

Pursuer Softening

Rather than focus on faults of other, focuses on her inner experience + attachment fears (sad, rejection, worthless, on her own)

Touches longing for & danger of connecting to other

She shares her experience + hubby shows care

In softer manner she shares her attachment longings & needs

He sees her vulnerability and comforts

Softening

- She expands her experience and access attachment fears, shame and a deeper truth/assurance/sense about herself
- The longing for comfort and connection arises
- From a vulnerable position of fear, rather than anger, she expresses her heart and attachment needs
- He sees her differently, as afraid rather than dangerous
- She risks to reach - - he is engaged so able to comfort
- This new connection redefines each other as a safe haven
- This allows for open, flexible, resilient interactions

2 Fears in Feeling and Sharing Affect

1. Self- criticism = emotions are unacceptable, inappropriate/dangerous

“I hate this part of myself” “It’s my weak side.”

2. Unacceptable to others to express emotions

“She’ll laugh at me if I tell her, so I can’t dare tell her.” “This is my weak side, to be hurt like this and need her so much.”

Fear of Vulnerability

“I can’t do it...I can’t let you in...I just can’t.”

a. This is actually letting one’s spouse in

b. Heighten this, *“this is scary, you could never let him in.”*

- Expand it, let them sit in this

- Slow it down, repeat the experience so they can hold it

- Innate longing to risk to let someone in arises

- Vulnerability moves spouse *“I will be there for you”*

Vulnerability Triggers Vulnerability

- Get her to sit with fear of being seen and share it:
“If I show you this chaotic ugly part of me, you won’t like it.”
- Get her to look at her husband
- When husband’s see the vulnerable side of their wife it triggers empathy and a desire to be there for her and to reach for her
- *This new experience brings healing and fosters safe haven*

Risking to be Vulnerable

- Two people are scarred, alone
- When the dragon comes they want to be there for each other, just don't know how
- She – *“if I share my hurt, it'll be too much for you and I'll overload you and you'd withdraw”*
- He - *“I'm scarred, I don't know how to comfort you it looks like I am withdrawing but I don't know how to be there for you, I really don't know how. But I want to be there for you, I care about you deeply.”*

Heightening

The therapist pauses and intentionally takes notice of a particular emotion. He pulls the emotion to the forefront causing the client to take notice of, touch, feel and process the emotional experience

“Under the anger, you feel so alone, like the rug has been pulled out from under you and you are all alone.”

Heightening ‘risk to reach’

There’s this scarred part that you’ve talked about before...a part that says, “maybe he doesn’t really love me after all. Maybe I shouldn’t risk sharing with him, letting him in, counting on him.”

You begin to fear that this may in fact be the case, right? This fear paralyzes you. You hear him asking to risk to come close, but it is so scary for you. This battle rages inside of you...”

Empathic Conjecture

The therapist attempts to go one step further in a client's present experience. The therapist reaches for what is just around the corner, the implicit is conjectured upon - to deepen the experience.

Empathic Conjecture

- *“Help me out if I miss here, but, you seem very sad as you say this. It hurts deeply. But also, I seem to be hearing a sense of loneliness from you? Yes?”*
- *“I hear your frustration, but I also wonder if there is a kind of sadness, a sense of loss there inside?”*
- *“I see your eyes are filled with tears of sadness, but I also hear in your voice a sense of, “I am tired of being alone. I am tired of you always putting me down.”*

Evocative Responding

Involves the use of questions to evoke, or bring up, emotions into the conversation. These questions expand the emotional experience of the couple.

“What happened right there Andy? Your wife said she has never felt cared for by you, and you rolled your eyes and folded your arms.”

“What do you feel as you say to him, “I don’t care if you stay or leave.”?”

Enactments

Examples: (a) *"Can you tell him, 'I slam the door when you leave, but when you are gone I feel so scarred'"*.

(b) *"This is the first time you've ever mentioned being ashamed. Could you tell him about that shame?"*

(c) *"Can you ask him right here, right now for what you need?"*

Main Functions: Creates new kinds of dialogue, new interactional processes and bonding events; leads to positive cycles of accessibility and responsiveness.

Stage Three: Consolidation

8. Solidify the new positions and cycles, find solutions to hot issues while remaining emotionally connected
9. Confirm growth, give hope for the future, narrative for 'testimony'

Couples need Hope for the Future

“I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call up me & come & pray to me, & I will listen to you. You will seek me & find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the Lord. Jeremiah 29: 11-14

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