Relationship Science Online

Therapeutic Approaches: Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT)

EFCT Perspective

- **EFT as a case in point** (Wiebe & Johnson, 2017)

Table 1

Stages and steps in Emotionally Focused Therapy for couples

Stage 1, *cycle de-escalation*	1. Assessment of couple cycle of negative interactions. 2. Identify attachment needs underlying each partner's position in the negative cycle. 3. Access primary emotions underlying each partner's position in the cycle. 4. Help the couple to understand their distress as the result of their negative cycle including unmet attachment needs, primary emotions and the secondary emotions and reactions that keep them stuck.
Stage 2, *restructuring attachment interactions*	5. Explore attachment needs and fears underlying secondary emotions and behaviours in the relationship and help couples express these to one another. 6. Foster responsiveness and engagement with one another's attachment bids for connection. 7. Restructure interactions of responsiveness and emotional engagement in structured enactments to promote key therapeutic events: *Withdrawer Re-engagement* and *Blamer Softening*.
Stage 3, *consolidation*	8. Foster new cycles of interaction based on sharing of attachment needs and primary emotions. 9. Help the couple to approach pragmatic issues by sharing and responding to attachment needs and fears.

EFCT Perspective

- **Attachment theory offers a lens for relationship therapists to assist couples in moving from distress and disconnection to security and connection** (Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2018).
- **In Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT), the emphasis is on facilitating bonding events** (Brubacher & Johnson, 2017).
  - The therapist begins by offering a safe haven to both partners and, over time, supports them in providing this for each other (Johnson, 2017).
  - The secondary attachment strategies (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016) of relentless support-seeking, protest and frustration (hyperactivation), or shutting down, withdrawal and compulsive self-reliance (deactivation), can organise one's approach and conceptualisation.
    - *The activation of these strategies reflect unmet attachment needs.*
  - Intervention involves:
    - *Empathic reflection.*
    - *Processing of emotion sequences by exploring triggers for emotional arousal and associated response tendencies (Johnson et al., 1999).*
    - *Tracking the negative 'dance'.*
      - *(i.e., the therapist explores and summarizes how each partner's reactions impact the other, resulting in recursive, negative loops).*

© Gery Karantzas, Relationship Science Online, 2018

EFCT Perspective

- **More on tracking the dance (Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2018 p.130):**
  - Therapist might say, 'The more you criticise, the more your partner gets defensive or turns away; the more s/he turns away, the more you feel alone and unsupported, resulting in more protest and criticism. This pattern is your enemy and I want to help you both to interrupt it.'
- **But outlining these kinds of patterns, in a similar manner, are promoted as part of IBCT and CBCT.**



EFCT Perspective

- **Feeney and Fitzgerald (2018) outline that the therapist helps partners to identify underlying emotions associated with interactions**
  - E.g., a pursuing partner's fear of abandonment or a withdrawing partner's fear of not measuring up), and validates their adaptive longings for a closer and safer relationship.
  - Note, such patterns are also tied to broad motivational systems of approach and avoidance (see my RSO email on approach and avoidance motivations).
  - These motives are inextricably tied to attachment insecurities.
- **As time passes… Conflict de-escalates…**
  - ↑ awareness of own and partner's reactive emotions and unmet needs.
  - ↑ collaborative efforts to interrupt negative interaction patterns.
  - ↑ benign attributions for each other's behaviors



© Gery Karantzas, Relationship Science Online, 2018