

Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT) is an experiential therapy that uses systems theory and attachment theory to help individuals and couples create new experiences which can have a transformative impact.

The role of the therapist is to provide the client with a secure base from which they can explore the various unhappy and painful aspects of their life, past and present. Therapy assists clients to recapture memories and express feelings and attachment needs that have been disallowed in previous relationships. This, in turn, helps clients to create a more coherent narrative or unified vision of themselves — a 'story' about the self. This capacity to construct a coherent narrative about oneself and one's difficulties is directly linked to secure attachment and the capacity for mutuality in relationship.

EFT is one of the few approaches to couple therapy shown by research to be effective – over 70% successful – even with highly distressed couples. An astounding 90% of couples experienced at least some improvement! EFT has also proven to be effective working with individuals in addressing anxiety, depression, childhood traumas as well as interpersonal or relational conflict.

### **Attachment Theory**

Attachment theory is not so much a method of treatment as a way of thinking about relationships.

Whereas secure attachment experiences lead to unconscious beliefs that others are available, understanding, and responsive, insecure attachment experiences lead to unconscious beliefs that significant others are unavailable and unresponsive, or rejecting, abandoning, and abusive.

Attachment theory helps us to understand the couple relationship in terms of the attachment styles each partner uses and the interaction between different styles.

- *Secure attachment* leads to a positive view of self and other. Secure individuals can establish close relationships and use others as support when needed
- *Preoccupied attachment* leads to a positive model of others, but negative model of self, eliciting a demanding and dependent style
- *Fearful attachment* is where others are viewed as uncaring and the self as unlovable. Intimacy is avoided because rejection is expected
- *Dismissing attachment* leads individuals to distance themselves from others to maintain a positive view of self. Compulsive self-reliance and self-control offer protection from rejection

Most people have a predominant pattern, but use multiple strategies. Each of us has our own unique repertoire of relationship experiences, beginning with our very earliest experiences with our mother and other caregivers. From this repertoire of early life experiences, each of us develops our own unconscious 'agenda for relationship', the uniquely personal pattern of what we look for, expect, fear and long for in our adult relationships. This becomes our personal template through which we instinctively, and largely unconsciously, manage our experience of relationships.

### Attachment Behavior

Attachment behavior is aimed at maintaining closeness and contact with key attachment figures. According to EFT, when an individual experiences disappointment, hurt, or a threat in their couple relationship, they will have an emotional response; its purpose is eliciting from the other partner behavior necessary for restoring a sense of security in the relationship. The form that the emotional response takes will depend upon the individual attachment style; this style is acquired in infancy and modified by subsequent experiences with attachment figures, including their current partner.

Often there will be a 'primary emotion' (e.g. fear or hurt), which is pushed out of awareness and replaced by a defensive 'secondary emotion' (e.g. anger) that is expressed to the partner. The partner may well respond in a similar manner — expressing not their primary emotional response to the individual's distress, but a defensive secondary emotion.

An attacking partner perhaps feels hurt or scared by the behavior, and fears rejection or abandonment. It is the attacker's fear of being abandoned that leads him or her to lash out like someone in imminent danger of drowning.

EFT also sees couple relationships as inherently systemic and interactional. In particular, it focuses on understanding the cyclical, destructive pattern of interaction that is at the center of the difficulties partners' experience. This pattern can be seen as having three central dimensions; 1. Closeness/Distance (pursue/withdrawer), 2. Dominance/Submission (Issues of power and control), 3. Blame/Withdraw (rage & shame).

### Change Process in EFT

Change in EFT understanding of change is the premise that change follows from the attainment of a new experience of emotional bonding between the partners in the therapy process. This occurs when primary emotions can be expressed and responded to in the relationship.

Change in EFTC is achieved through the facilitation of three sequential 'movements'.

- *De-escalation of the conflict* between the partners involves the progressive unfolding of the experience that each partner has in the relationship, and the clarification of the interactive cycle between them.
- *Softening* involves dominant or pursuing partners owning and expressing their primary vulnerability: for example, the experience of unloveableness and shame that lies beneath their controlling behavior or critical demands.
- *Re-engagement of the withdrawing or submissive partner* in the relationship, which involves that partner identifying and owning, in the presence of the other, their primary emotional experience in the relationship.