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Deepening Emotional Experience and Restructuring the Bond in Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy

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Introduction

Emotionally focused therapy (EFT) is based on the powerful role which emotion plays in intimate relationships. The word emotion is based on the Latin word *emovere*, “to move.” In the Stage 1 change event of EFT—de-escalation—therapists focus on clarifying how emotion organizes a couple’s typical pattern of interaction (see ► [Clarifying the Negative Cycle in Emotionally Focused Therapy](#), Brubacher and Johnson, this volume). In Stage 2 of EFT, therapists deepen emotional experience using the power of emotion to fuel the two transformative change events of withdrawer re-engagement and blamer softening—thereby reshaping the bond to one of safe connection.

The goal of EFT—reshaping relational distress and insecure attachment into a secure attachment bond—is achieved through deepening attachment emotion and interacting from within that deepened emotional experience. Support from

attachment neuroscience shows that deepening and reprocessing emotion in EFT creates secure bonds that not only have a significant emotion regulation function (Coan and Maresh 2014), they actually change how the brain responds to threat (Johnson et al. 2013).

Deepening emotional experience can be defined as *heightening and expanding the experience* of attachment emotions that, unacknowledged, drive partners’ self-protective behaviors in a distressed relationship. It includes helping a partner to get an alive, vivid felt sense of immediately felt primary emotion that is typically quickly obscured by self-protective secondary emotions such as anger or numbness during attachment threatening moments (Johnson 2004).

Theoretical Framework

The practice of deepening attachment emotion is based on research regarding the nature of couple distress and satisfaction showing that it is the quality of emotional engagement and expression of clear emotional messages that shift negative interaction patterns and shape secure bonding interactions (Johnson 2004; ► [Attachment in Couples and Families](#), Johnson and Wiebe, this volume). Nine process of change studies (see www.iceeft.com) validate that the two key processes predicting positive outcome in EFT are *deepening emotional engagement*—especially exploring attachment fears and longing—and

disclosing and responding to this experience in *affiliative* (warm, caring, self-disclosing, and responsive) *interactions* (Greenman and Johnson 2013).

The initial deepening of attachment emotion occurs in Stage 1 of EFT when a therapist helps each partner to identify and *taste* the primary emotion underlying his/her reactive moves and secondary emotion in the typical negative cycle. It is in Stage 2, however, that the fundamental therapeutic focus is on deepening and expanding primary attachment fears and longings and accessing and disclosing the needs embedded in that emotion. This forms the core of the transformative change of EFT, where partners' disclosure of attachment fears and needs pulls for the other partner to respond in new and reassuring ways. Clear, congruent expressions of deepened emotion evoke new ways of reaching and responding that reshape the attachment bond into one of security and connection (Johnson and Brubacher 2016).

Rationale for Deepening Emotion

Emotion is the agent of change as EFT therapists help couples to reshape their despair and disconnection into loving, lasting bonds. Emotion is recognized for priming key responses (Ekman 2003, 2007) in interactions between partners. Attachment theory (Mikulincer and Shaver 2016) delineates how partners in insecure attachment bonds dismiss or exaggerate emotional cues in themselves and others, deny and fragment emotional experience, and send unclear messages in their best attempts to deal with an underlying sense of rejection and abandonment by their partners.

Emotion is also recognized for being a reliable source of information about needs (Frijda 1986). Deepening awareness of primary attachment emotion gives a partner access to the need embedded in that emotion and the capacity to send a clear request to the other partner to meet this need, in place of the indirect messages that have been reinforcing cyclical negative interaction patterns.

In the de-escalation change event of EFT Stage 1, partners typically discover and name the underlying emotions and attachment fears driving their negative cycles. The withdrawer newly articulates and *touches* the aching sense that s/he is failing to measure up in his/her lover's eyes. An angry, critical partner formulates and *tastes* his/her softer underlying fears of abandonment.

After partners de-escalate (identifying the relationship problem as the negative pattern fuelled by underlying emotions), they begin Stage 2, where the EFT therapist deepens the vulnerable attachment emotions that were touched in Stage 1. Deepening engagement with core underlying fears and needs increases mutual sharing and responsiveness, restructuring the bond, and creating *broaden and build cycles* (Mikulincer and Shaver 2016) of security.

Description

Definition

"Deepening" means to evoke partners' present moment experiencing of primary attachment emotions in a vivid and concrete way. Deepening emotion is a process of *present-moment engagement* with the core underlying attachment fears, linking bodily felt awareness, perceptions, affect, and impulses towards action. *Deepening* emotional experience makes it possible for a partner to discover and then be guided to disclose the attachment need embedded within the depth of core emotion. Clear signals about needs pull for compassionate, empathic, and bonding responses (Johnson 2004).

Core Process for Reshaping the Attachment Bond

Reshaping the attachment bond begins with one partner deepening core attachment fears and disclosing these fears to the partner, after which the partner is supported to receive this disclosure. Next, the partner deeply experiencing his/her attachment fear is supported to access the attachment need embedded within that deeply felt emotion. The apex of the change event is when the experiencing partner takes the risk to reach

towards the other partner to ask for this need to be met, followed by the other partner's response to that reach. Deepening attachment emotion is the core of EFT's Stage 2 bonding events: withdrawer re-engagement (WRE) and blamer-softening (BLS). In WRE, the formerly withdrawn partner shares attachment fears and needs and from an engaged and assertive position, asks for what s/he needs to remain engaged and to have a safe and secure connection with the other partner. In BLS, the anxious, pursuing partner explores attachment fears of the other's dependability, fears of one's own worthiness, and fears of reaching to the other and while deeply engaging with these fears, risks reaching to the now engaged partner to ask for what s/he needs to soothe these attachment fears.

This Stage 2 change process is focused first on the more withdrawn partner and then on the more anxious, pursuing partner. First the exploring partner is helped to *deepen, distill, and disclose his or her primary emotion*. Then the other partner is supported to *acknowledge and accept this "new" spouse*. (Disclosures made from newly expanded emotions convey a new and different view of the partner.) Finally, the EFT therapist lingers with the disclosing partner in a felt sense of the fear so as to evoke the attachment needs embedded within that core fear. *Choreographing reaching and responding between partners to disclose attachment needs and request the other partner's help to meet these needs* marks the apex of reshaping attachment security.

Interventions

Primary interventions for deepening emotion (illustrated in the case example below) are *empathic reflections, evocative questions* that focus on the cue, the bodily arousal, the attachment meanings and the action tendency of the emotion, *heightening* emotional experience and *empathic conjectures*, in an attachment frame, of the client's emotional experience.

After emotional experience has been deepened and distilled, the therapist will help the partner to "disclose" this experience to the other partner, as in, "Can you turn and tell your partner, 'It's true – I do fire up and get louder (action tendency) when

I see you shrug your shoulders and turn away (cue). I just can't bear this dreadful loneliness (primary emotion) and the sense that I am too much for you' (attachment meaning)?" After directing the disclosing partner to share this message, the therapist checks first what it was like to share this, and then asks the listening partner about their in-the-moment experience of receiving the message. Each partner's emotions that emerge are then reflected and heightened, to deepen emotional engagement within and between partners.

Case Example

Ben and Tiara had a familiar pattern of pursue-attack, defend-withdraw. The more she would push him to help around the house, the more he would defend himself and sullenly retreat to his computer. This rapid-fire cycle began to soften as they recognized how they were unwittingly triggering a negative cycle. Both deepened their awareness of the more vulnerable emotional music playing in the background. Ben's deepened engagement with the attachment fears underlying his defensive, withdrawn position, reveals dread that he is doomed to lose her one day, and a daily sensation of his heart dropping into his stomach with this fear.

Ben: She gets so upset with me – I am afraid of saying the wrong thing that will fire her up. I hate her being upset – my heart sinks to my gut – and then I fire back at her.

Therapist: You get scared of her firing at you and just before you fire back, your heart sinks to your gut sensing she is upset with *you*. I wonder if we could just hear a little more about that fear – your heart sinking to your gut, when this powerful, beautiful person that is obviously so important to you, comes out loud and angry?

Ben: Eeeew! That I'm not good enough for her. I'm not meeting her needs. It makes me feel like I'm screwing up

the relationship and I'm doomed to lose her. (*Note the emergence of attachment meanings, negative view of self and core fear of losing.*)

Therapist: So, it is really very scary. (*Slow, soft tone:*) (*Heightening the fear.*) You're saying when you hear Tiara angry, (*reflecting the trigger for the fear*) that you get very, very scared. Your heart sinks to your stomach. You think, "Oh no I'm going to lose her, I'm not good enough. Oh, no I can't possibly meet her needs," and you feel you've already lost her, yes?

Ben: I get really tense and anxious (*puts his hand on his abdomen*).

Therapist: Yeah, right in your gut you feel a tightness. Do you feel any of that now as you are describing it?

Ben: Totally – it's rock hard tense. I'm not able to find words to describe it. Just a real tension I guess.

Therapist: Just this big tense place of, "Oh no, I could lose you!" (*Heightening with proxy voice conjecture/ reflecting what he has said earlier.*) That is a very scary place. I'd like you to imagine telling Tiara how very scary this is – to be so certain you've already lost her – you feel your heart sink to your stomach and your stomach becomes rock hard – so tense – frozen in fear of losing Tiara.

Ben: It makes me really nervous that when we are arguing that you are going to decide that this is the end of it and you're going to decide that I'm just not good enough for you and that you don't want to be in this relationship anymore.

(*Following this disclosure, the therapist processes with each one in turn what it was like to share and what it was like to hear.*)

Therapist: So, what is it like as you are telling her this?

Ben: I feel a bit of relief. I don't think I've ever told her how get scared I get when we are arguing or when she is upset. It's a relief to let you know how scared I get– of losing you. (*Owning his primary emotion*).

When the therapist evokes Tiara's experience in hearing from Ben, Tiara is clearly moved and expresses her shock and love for Ben.

Deepening the present moment experiencing of Ben's attachment fear, made it possible for him to disclose it clearly to Tiara. The therapist lingers in Ben's deepened fear of failing and his exhaustion at trying to get Tiara's approval, until he is able to access his need for assurance and acceptance. Ben steps forward, assertively stating his longings and needs to Tiara.

Ben: Your complaints and criticism are too much for me. I need you to back off and show me you still want to give me a chance. I do want to be close to you. I don't want to fire back to shut you down anymore – I just need to know that I'm enough for you. Please give me a chance!

Tiara is shocked at Ben's risk of stepping close to her. She responds with a message of clearly wanting him and wanting him to know that. Next, the therapist deepens Tiara's attachment fears and shapes enactments where she can risk reaching to Ben to ask him to soothe her fears and meet her attachment needs.

From within her deepened fears, first that Ben might disappear again and secondly shaking in fear and disgust at her own unworthiness, Tiara accesses her need for Ben to see her vulnerabilities and uncertainties and to assure her he likes what he sees and will not leave. The therapist supports Tiara to stand on that fearful ledge, and to risk leaping off the cliff and to ask Ben to catch her.

Therapist: (voice quivering) Can, can you catch me – want me – when I'm so pathetic?

Deeply moved by her vulnerability and her need for his response, Ben rises to the occasion to solidly affirm he loves her more than ever. Together Ben and Tiara begin to create a new positive cycle of reaching and responding that pulls them close and reinforces their bond.

Deepened emotion, disclosed to the partner creates new contact between them. Clear, simple messages of primary attachment needs embedded within deepened primary emotion pulls the other partner into offering a positive response, initiating new positive bonding cycles of reaching and responding.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Attachment in Couples and Families](#)
- ▶ [Attachment Injury Resolution Model in Emotionally Focused Therapy](#)
- ▶ [Attachment Theory](#)
- ▶ [Clarifying the Negative Cycle in Emotionally Focused Therapy](#)
- ▶ [Emotion in Couple and Family Therapy](#)
- ▶ [Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy](#)
- ▶ [Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy and Physical Health in Couples and Families](#)
- ▶ [Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy and Trauma](#)
- ▶ [Emotionally Focused Family Therapy](#)
- ▶ [Hold Me Tight Enrichment Program](#)
- ▶ [Hold Me Tight/Let Me Go Enrichment Program for Families and Teens](#)

- ▶ [Johnson, Susan](#)
- ▶ [Training Emotionally Focused Couple Therapists](#)

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