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A Report on a Research Project - Changing Attachment Security in Couple Therapy

The question rated as the most frequently asked on Google in a number of surveys is some version of “What is love and how does it work?” Our society seems to be obsessed with the nature of love and its viability in adult life. Health oriented clinicians and researchers who note the links to positive bonding and heart disease, immune functioning, depression and anxiety are becoming similarly fascinated. Sex therapists are more and more cognizant of the fact that couple communication skills and level of secure attachment predict how couples deal with sexual problems. Attachment science, offering as it does a systematic and empirically based understanding of romantic love and bonding, answers many key questions about the nature of love and how to shape effective targeted interventions to alleviate couple distress while building lasting bonds and the individual resilience fostered by such bonds. This science takes couple intervention out of the area of conflict containment and basic relationship education and shapes it into an intervention that can create potent bonding experiences that are potentially able to change internal models of self and other and habitual ways of regulating affect and dealing with stress. This science can also help address the long touted flaw of couple therapy—that it addresses only the symptoms of relationship distress rather than the core variables that define love relationships.

Given the above, I would like to share a project that seems to me to be the culmination of our thirty years of work in couple and family therapy research, offering a brief snapshot of the project’s seven studies, some of which are already published or in press, some still in review. The consistently positive outcome and process of change research on Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) is already well known. In this new project, we examined whether EFT- based on the exponentially expanding science of adult attachment- could change not only factors like relationship satisfaction, but also foster the felt sense of safe emotional connection — secure attachment— in distressed couples. Secure bonding is associated with an enormous range of positive mental health outcomes. So we wanted to see if we could, through shifting patterns of affect regulation and shaping bonding conversations, not only heal relationships but create relationships that foster health and strengthen partners.



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In brief, we took 32 distressed, anxiously and avoidantly attached couples and gave them 20 sessions of EFT (Burgess Moser et al., in press). We looked at our success in reducing anxious and avoidant attachment, at predictors of success, key factors in the process of change and, using a brain scan methodology, examined if, after bonding conversations, female partners brains encoded threat differently when holding their partners' hand. We found that indeed attachment avoidance and relationship satisfaction show session-by-session improvements over the course of EFT, and improvements in responsive secure attachment interactions from pre to post therapy. Relationship-specific attachment anxiety also showed improvement across EFT sessions, but only among those who achieved a blamer-softening event; this change event is essentially a corrective emotional experience of engaged bonding where needs for comfort and care are expressed congruently and responded to with empathy. As in previous studies of EFT, partners who changed and changed their relationship reported and showed deeper emotional processing and the ability to reach for a partner in an affiliative way in the enactments set up by the therapist.

Another study found that higher relationship-specific attachment anxiety and higher emotional control at the start of therapy predicted greater improvement in relationship satisfaction (Dalgleish et al., 2015a). Couples who have a softening event were more likely to improve in relationship satisfaction. Among softened couples higher attachment avoidance at intake was associated with less improvement in relationship

satisfaction (Dalgleish et al., 2015b). A recent follow-up study demonstrates that attachment anxiety, secure attachment interactions, and relationship satisfaction continues to improve across multiple time-points in two-years of follow-up (Wiebe et al., 2015a). Couples who change more during therapy in terms of anxiety, avoidance and trust show higher levels of relationship satisfaction across two year after completion of EFT (Wiebe et al., 2015b). Finally a brain scan study (Johnson et al., 2013) showed that female partners primed with the threat of electric shock registered extreme alarm when lying alone in a brain scanner, holding the hands of a stranger, or holding the hands of their partner except after EFT and the bonding interactions that EFT promotes. After EFT, their brains remained calm under threat and the pain they reported from the shock also diminished.

This final study and the others mentioned validate the power of an attachment oriented interpersonal therapy to transform key relationships and impact physiological responses that are key in attachment theory. They also validate the relevance and the basic tenants of attachment theory and demonstrate how attachment, usually considered a personality and developmental variable, can change in psychotherapy. It seems that this kind of research has the potential to usher in a new era not only in couple and family therapy but in our general understanding of love and love relationships and in therapies where connection with responsive others is used as a resource for positive change in individual symptomatology.

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