



International Centre for Excellence in EFT

Extending EFCT to EFIT: Therapy as a Process of Love



Lorrie Brubacher

At the 2014 international Society for the Exploration of Psychotherapy Integration (SEPI) conference held in Montreal, Canada, I had the opportunity to present how Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) – a uniquely attachment-based model for couple therapy – extends beautifully to working with individuals (EFIT). My presentation, entitled *Emotionally Focused Individual Therapy (EFIT) – Extending an Attachment-Based Couple Model into Working with Individuals: Therapy as a Process of Love*, was built on Sue Johnson's definition of health as: "emotional accessibility and flexible responsiveness – being able to engage fully in current moment-to-moment experience and use this experience to make active choices in how to define the self and relate to others." You may ask: How do Sue Johnson's 4 P's of EFT for couples (Patterns and Positions in Present moment Processes of regulating emotion) apply to work with individuals who do not necessarily have a romantic relationship or close relationships? The answer is by honoring the relational view of human nature and the reality that

all human beings are embedded in social contexts, which vary by their emotional accessibility, reliability and engagement.

Humans are relational bonding mammals

The couple therapy model extends to work with individuals because of its foundation in a relational view of human nature. By nature, human beings are wired to co-regulate one another's emotions. We are relational, bonding mammals for whom relationships are a matter of life and death, and our ability to feel connected to others makes us feel competent and worthy. Jim Coan describes this as Social Baseline Theory, meaning that we are innately or pre-consciously soothed or comforted by the presence of another. This occurs before we even have time to consciously notice a threat and then begin to self-regulate or reach to another for support. He frequently refers to his colleague Denny Proffitt's research, publicized on CBS News under the heading *Getting by with a Little Help from Friends* <http://www.cbsnews.com/videos/getting-by-with-a-little-help-from-friends/>. In this study, subjects stood at the bottom of a hill wearing a heavy backpack. When asked to estimate the slope of the hill, they estimated it to be considerably less steep when standing with a friend, than when they were standing alone. The longer the friendship, the less steep they estimated the hill to be. When we have another to rely on, problems in living are considerably lessened. We have evolved to assume this social connection with others. Darwin noted that survival was essentially about cooperation. Those who survived were those who entered into cooperative bonds with their fellows.

Affect Regulation is the Core Issue in Presenting Problems

Being alone, according to Jim Coan, is like adding a weight or a heavy backpack, while being with another restores us to our baseline of relative calm. The human baseline is to be innately soothed in connection with another. In the absence of secure attachment relationships, individuals develop insecure attachment strategies. These strategies then frequently result in ineffective patterns of affect regulation. These patterns often begin and perpetuate mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, trauma survival reactions, addictions, school and career problems, destructive anger and other affect regulation difficulties.

Distress is maintained by cycles of ineffective emotion regulation strategies

In the presentation, video clips of three individuals held poignant images that represent different styles of coping with difficult emotions. Tanya hyperactivates her attachment needs. Her anxiety “bleeds into all areas of her life”: conversations with unresponsive others “leave her feeling raw”; ruminations “eat away and last and last...”; she gets caught in unending internal cycles of self-doubting and blaming others.

Mack suppresses his attachment needs.

Mack: *I try to put myself out as being very confident and self assured – and I’m not – you know because even little barbs or little comments from people destroy me on the inside.*

Therapist: *And you manage to not let it show? (Yeah). How do you cover all that – inside you feel destroyed and on the outside you look just fine?*

Mack: *Yeah, ‘cause it’s a big act. I just put it over in the corner and don’t deal with it. I just suck it up and move on.*

Mack acknowledges that his avoidance is “like a wall” he puts up and that he has pushed his own emotions so far away he hardly recognizes his own needs and feelings.

Sandy, living in isolation with depression, anxiety and a career crisis, struggles with two attachment strategies in conflict – anxiety and avoidance. *“I’m not able to stay in the place I am right now...I’m already*

years ahead, worrying about where I’ll be – who I’ll be. I’m like that cartoon image where the little guy is swinging and swinging blindly, trying to make contact and the big guy is pushing back, not letting him make contact with anything or anyone. I want something – I don’t know what. There is no one I can count on – no one who will not hurt me back.”

Internal cycles mirror interpersonal patterns

Bowlby said the inner rings and the outer rings of experience (internal and interpersonal processes) mirror and maintain each other. Video clips of Lana illustrate how her internal cycles of dismissing her own pain and longings mirror her interpersonal patterns through many present and past relationships. She repeatedly ignores and minimizes her own pain and tries hard to please and accommodate to others, continually feeling unseen and unappreciated. We track repetitive patterns in her relationships – with her alcoholic ex-husband, estranged partner, loving, but inaccessible grandfather, remote grandmother, and alcoholic mother. The image that captures her experience internally and in each relationship is of “being put aside” – like when you “put something away in a box.” The therapist reflects and heightens until Lana accesses her primary emotions of sadness at feeling alone and her fear of being abandoned yet again. Feeling her core sadness and fear allows Lana to find the longing and motivation to listen to the internal “boxed Lana” and to reach towards responsive others.

Corrective Emotional Experiences

The change events in the process of individual therapy parallel that of couple therapy. Video clips illustrate Stage One, de-escalation – tracking cycles of emotion regulation strategies, accessing primary emotion, seeing the patterns as the problem, as well as Stage Two, transformation and reprocessing of primary emotion into new emotions /new cycles of reaching to safe others for support, etc. This mobilizes secure attachment with others and within self. A Stage Two video shows the resolution of a pivotal injury from an attachment figure, illustrating an adaptation of AIRM (Attachment Injury Resolution Model) from EFT couple therapy. Implications for this process with trauma survivors, where the injurer is held fully responsible were also discussed. Stage Three, consolidation, was

the EFT community news

illustrated by describing how new-found resources and safe haven /secure-base experiences with others and within self, were integrated across the client's series of problems.

Therapy as a Process of Love

Drawing from Sue Johnson's *Love Sense*, as well as from Lewis, Amini & Lannon's *General Theory of Love*, I discussed how EFIT is a process of love in three ways: between therapist and client; between the client and his / her past and present relationships; and within the client's internal processes. Clinicians who identify as CBT, psychodynamic and EFT (from both the Johnson and Greenberg models), from Europe, Israel, and New York appreciated this radical, explicit claim about therapy as a process of love and expressed value for seeing concretely how it can be carried out. One person said: "The people were seasoned clinicians and to see them in tears (from the video clips) was astounding!" My aim, of course, was not to get people in tears but to engage them and to portray clearly my argument for the value of extending our parsimonious EFCT model to individuals (EFIT).

It was indeed gratifying to discuss and witness the uniquely palpable strengths of EFIT. Clearly, in spite of some significant similarities, the powerful integration of attachment theory with systemic and experiential approaches is not found in other models such as attachment-focused individual therapies (e.g. Costello) or Emotion Focused Therapy (Greenberg,

Watson, Pascaul-Leone, Pos, Goldman etc.). EFIT places the destination of creating "effective dependency" both within and beyond the therapy relationship at the front and centre of it's approach. In contrast, an Emotion Focused Therapy workshop presented *self-soothing* and *differentiation from others* as initial and salient therapeutic tasks!

Attachment provides the EFIT therapist with a simple map of distress and repair and provides a streamlined focus for which emotions have salience (i.e. the different forms of attachment panic). We have a simple map to recognize the basic modes of inner experience and relational strategies for regulating affect. This map guides us to the destination of "effective dependency". As interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts are reframed with an attachment lens, the positive intentions and resources of conflicting parts and persons become accessible (except in cases of abuse). Emotions are reprocessed and interactions are reshaped, creating safe and secure bonds with (some) others and within self. Since 2009, two of Sue Johnson's articles on the Externship CD contain sections on using EFT with individuals, so if you've not read them yet, I would encourage you to begin there. Another article on the topic and more workshops will be coming soon.

Lorrie Brubacher, MEd, LMFT (NC), RMFT
EFT Supervisor & Trainer
Greensboro Charlotte Center for EFT