

A couple is shown from the waist up, holding a large, vibrant red heart. The man is on the left, wearing a dark suit, and the woman is on the right, wearing a red dress. They are both looking up at the heart. The background is a soft, light green with numerous white, petal-like shapes falling around them, creating a romantic and ethereal atmosphere. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

emotionally focused
Couples Therapy

By Michael Wayne Regier, Ph.D.

Mother Teresa writes:

*"I have found a paradox,
if you love until it hurts,
there can be no more hurt,
only love."*



Steve and Susan should have the world by the tail. Steve is a successful surgeon who is well-respected in his community; Susan has done a great job raising their three children who plan to graduate from top-notch schools. They have had a very busy 25-year marriage focusing on Steve's career and the needs of their children. But something has been wrong with their relationship since it's beginning. They never really attached. The romance that brought them together faded after their first year together. They began to quickly suppress their needs for each other's love and nurturing. A deep loneliness set in that they denied by staying busy and taking care of others. Now, with their children out of the house and retirement in sight, they are in a relationship crisis. At a time in their lives when they should be able to enjoy each other more than ever, they struggle with deep resentments and angry outbursts. Due to a nearly non-existent sex life, shallow communication, and diminishing love and respect, their marriage is now in divorce litigation.



Steve and Susan are just one example of the many couples experiencing marital crisis because they could no longer live in disconnection. Sadly, most of these couples will divorce; and 70 percent of them will find themselves back in this same situation after committing to second marriages. The phenomenon of divorce, and the pain and fallout that will impact generations to come may be at the root of what many describe as the decline of our great culture. While most of us have been deeply hurt by love, knowing how to live in love remains still more elusive.

The New Science of Adult Love

Fortunately, psychology and science are giving us new answers for what is best described as love sicknesses and its cure. 'Sickness,' in this instance, however, is not the puppy dog feeling described in romantic songs, but rather a type of protective, counterintuitive behavior we engage in year after year that keeps us from truly connecting with those we have intimate relationships with. A sickness that can turn into a disease that eats away at our tenuous loving bonds until they snap, or eventually disintegrate.

Research in neurobiology and attachment psychology has formed the foundation for a whole new approach to counseling these couples in distress called Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT). Research has demonstrated that 72-73 percent of couples in EFT are able to develop and maintain

long-term attachment, and over 90 percent of couples find improvement in just 8-12 sessions. This groundbreaking understanding of human emotions reveals answers about the scientific chemistry of our most intimate relationships.

What makes EFT so different from other forms of marital therapy is its understanding of how emotion and attachment form the foundation for fulfilling love relationships. By helping couples more deeply express their feelings of love, anger and abandonment, emotionally focused therapists create conditions where partners can meet each other where it matters most. In matters of love, it is emotions that attach us and throw us into cycles of approach and avoidance. Using EFT, our hearts may be opened to the cries of our lover more fully, and we can feel the depth of his or her anger, fear and frustration.

It is this approach that separates EFT from other types of marital counseling—the understanding that feeling more deeply is at the heart of what heals us, not thinking differently, communicating better, or experimenting with a new love behavior. As it turns out, emotions have their own intelligence, which provide the best form of guidance for navigating the stormy seas of relationships. Just as researchers have discovered that emotional intelligence may be the best predictor for effective CEO leadership, it is also the key to making love relationships truly intimate and productive.

How Emotionally Focused Therapy Works

Marital therapists have traditionally focused on changing the thoughts and behaviors of couples. The idea was that if couples could learn to talk to each other without anger and change harmful behaviors, they could learn to love again. Attempts in traditional therapy are made to minimize the anger in a relationship and to negotiate a truce. Couples were then given homework to have date nights, develop hobbies, and to work at

human babies who were given food and clothing but died because they were not given physical comfort. What researchers have discovered is that our need for a secure attachment is a built-in survival mechanism that lasts for the duration of our lives. Yes, adults as well as infants need secure attachments for both emotional and physical health. And, this information is powering the understanding and treatment of individuals and couples struggling to make real and lasting connections.

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goal setting. Therapists doing this kind of therapy act as conflict referees, helping couples learn the rules of marriage civility.

About 15 years ago a graduate student named Sue Johnson, along with her professor Les Greenberg, developed a new kind of therapy that began to focus on emotions rather than thoughts or behaviors. This therapy eventually became known as Emotionally Focused Therapy, or EFT. In turn, EFT is based on the attachment theory work of developmental psychologists John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. Bowlby and Ainsworth suggested that attachment is an innate system that motivates infants to seek comfort and safety from their primary caregivers.

These attachment theory pioneers conducted research on the bond between parents and their children and concluded that attachment is our most powerful survival instinct. As an example of the power of attachment theory, one such early researcher named Harry Harlow even demonstrated that baby monkeys prefer to starve while clinging to the comfort of a cloth monkey rather than go to a wire monkey who offers them food. Likewise, there are many documented accounts of

The Importance of Adult Attachment

Researchers have found that people in marital distress suffer from 10 times the amount of depression as those in non-distressed marriages. Many studies have demonstrated that a secure emotional attachment results in an increased capacity to tolerate stress. For example, University of Virginia Neuroscientist Jim Coan performed an experiment where one member of a couple was placed in a MRI machine so that researchers could see when the stress centers of the brain were being activated. Coan found that when the partner in the chamber was given an electric shock, there was significantly less stress

activity in the brain if the subject was holding the hand of his or her spouse. The happier the marital relationship, the less stress registered in the brain.

Many more examples exist: Louise Hawkley of the University of Chicago found that loneliness doubles our chances of stroke or heart attack; James House of the University of Michigan found that emotional isolation is more dangerous to one's health than smoking or high blood pressure; and Israeli researchers found that those in secure relationships suffered much less stress in the aftermath of missile attacks. Research across the globe corroborates one simple fact: a failure to attach dramatically increases our risk of physical and emotional problems. Furthermore, connected, loving contact within a happy relationship actually has the capacity to protect us from traumatic stress.

We now understand that the same powerful hormones produced by nursing mothers are released through connected sexual intercourse and holding one another close. These bonding activities produce what researchers call the "cuddle hormones," oxytocin and vasopressin. These hormones create feelings of love and connection and flood us with calm and happy emotions that combat stress hormones like cortisol. The implications of love research are profound. The bottom line is that having a loving connection in your life is essential to disease prevention and life satisfaction.

Deep emotions are responsible for the seemingly irrational behavior manifested by couples in relationship distress. Researchers now see emotion as a powerful information processing system capable of the integration of physiological responses, meaning schemes and action tendencies. Emotion is the radar that tells us if there is danger or pleasure ahead, far before our thoughts can make sense of what is happening.

These dramatic displays of emotion are far from the irrational fighting that so



the chemistry of love

Lust, romance and attachment are the three kinds of love that motivate distinctly different behaviors. Lust is the desire for sexual gratification and is associated with testosterone. Lust drives us to copulate with nearly anyone who will meet our need.

Romantic attraction consists of compelling feelings such as elation, heightened energy, obsessive thinking and focused attention on new love. It is associated with an elevated activity of dopamine and norepinephrine in the brain and low activity of serotonin. The more romantic love we get, the more we want. Being frustrated by it causes separation anxiety, which results in sweating and heart palpitations. The feelings of intense energy, hyperactivity, sleeplessness and craving that it causes are similar to the symptoms caused by cocaine addiction. Unlike lust, romantic attraction is focused specifically on one person that we believe is our ideal match. It helps us forsake all others for the one special person we desire above anyone else.

Further differences in neurochemistry have also been discovered between the sexes. The brains of men who are in romantic love have higher activity in the visual centers of the brain, while women have more activity in the region of the brain responsible for memory and detail. One possible explanation for this is that men visually scan their love choice to determine if she is an ideal match for bearing children. On the other hand, women may remember everything that is said to determine if their beloved has the integrity to provide and protect for their offspring over time.

Attachment, the third type of love, is the calm and emotional connection we feel with long-term partner relationships. Oxytocin and vasopressin are the chemicals that play the major role in attachment. Oxytocin is the bonding chemical that is released when mothers breastfeed and during sexual intercourse. Unlike the excitement of dopamine, it produces feelings of deep affection, serenity and the desire for cooperation.

Men and women have different behaviors that stimulate attachment. American men define emotional closeness by doing things side-by-side while American women view intimacy as talking face-to-face. A woman from Botswana explained attachment by saying, "When two people are first together their hearts are on fire and their passion is very great. After



many therapists try to head off at all costs. Behind the attacks and withdrawals is desperation to preserve the thread of attachment that remains. The way to understand the language of emotions is to give them a voice and to listen to the patterns of hurt and protest; trying to suppress or circumvent your emotions is the surest way to drive a relationship on the brink, over the final edge.

Bill and Karen had done everything they knew how to do to repair their damaged 20-year relationship. Bill was a successful businessman who had an affair with someone he worked with. The years of sexual denial caused him to weaken and be unfaithful during a time of great occupational stress. When they started EFT, Karen was extremely detached from Bill and his attempts to restore intimacy in their marriage only served to anger her further. She just wanted to be left alone, and the more she rejected Bill's overtures the more depressed and suspicious he became that she was being unfaithful. The cycle of approach, rejection and mistrust reached toxic proportions.



The Emotional Foundation of Love Relationships

The EFT therapist listens with compassion to each person's emotional language while encouraging both partners to express the fullness of what they are feeling. By giving validity and compassion to each person's emotional reality, both Bill and Karen began to feel the depth of their own and the other person's deep feelings of abandonment and betrayal.

It is in feeling the depth of each other's emotions that we feel loved and understood. It is not enough for our partner to tell us that they care. We want our lover to experience our deep feelings. We are wired to not trust until we trust our partner's capacity to feel for us. Bill and Karen's EFT therapist did not attempt to define who was at fault for the past failures in the relationship. The feelings in the present told each of them everything they needed to know. Their hearts instructed them about what was necessary to create an emotional reality that would make it safe to deeply attach, perhaps for the first time. By truly feeling the pain of our lover,

we create a safe place to emotionally hold and be held. As the crying child needs a parent's embrace, adults too need to be held tight when they are feeling emotional distress.

Creating Chemistry that Endures

Lust, romantic attraction and attachment are chemical systems in the brain that operate separately from each other (see sidebar). We can have lust or romantic attraction for someone separate from the person we are attached to. The key to a long and happy relationship is to keep nurturing attachment and to not feed the neurochemistry of lust and romance once you find a life partner. If you find yourself lonely in a monogamous relationship, it is important to "stop the bus" and talk about what you are feeling. If you have been attached, this may be all you need to do to create the chemistry that will draw you back into the warmth of serene connection.

If you find yourself growing resentful and distant, seek professional counseling. Even if you have never been securely attached, an EFT therapist may be able to help you create the chemistry that you have never had in any relationship. The chemistry of attachment, which is anti-depressant, anti-anxiety, and an all-natural immune system booster, is good medicine.

The psychology of attachment has created a new theory of health, which suggests that we find our true identity in healthy dependency rather than independence. We need our most intimate relationships to be built on trust before we can extend ourselves with confidence into a wider relational universe. Regardless of how old we are, most of us find ourselves in the arms of another. We are created to embark on this journey of life in a relationship. Regardless of how many love failures we have experienced, we are made for attachment. With the right guidance, it is in attachment that we will find our safe harbor. ■

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