

When couples come in for counselling, it always seems important to me to tell them what they are letting themselves in for. I've found that when people have a sense of the direction we're taking in therapy, it makes it easier to understand what we're doing and to pay attention to what is happening for them at home.

Emotionally Focused Couple therapy (EFT) was formulated in the 1980s with the work of **Les Greenberg** and **Sue Johnson**, researchers in Canada. Les and Sue took strands of work in **emotion research**, **experiential therapy**, and **attachment theory** and wove them together to produce EFT.

So, what is EFT in practice, in the therapy room? When couples arrive in therapy, they are often in conflict or experiencing distance from each other. This can be as a result of slow, eroding of closeness over the years or because of specific emotional "injuries" in the relationship. For many couples, these issues – old or new, long standing or recent – often result in what we call a negative interaction cycle. More often than not, one partner is the more pursuing (blaming, critical or attacking) partner and the other is the more withdrawing (shut down, numb or defensive) partner. The negative cycle results from these interactions. Each couple's cycle is unique and composed of specific hurts and emotional reactions.

The interesting thing most couples don't understand about each other when they argue or ignore each other at home is that underneath these surface reactions (anger, blame,

defensiveness, coldness) there are softer emotions being triggered. These softer emotions are often about fear, shame or loneliness, which are experienced when the partner who is “supposed” to love and care for you is not available to you at that critical moment. We work to understand what’s getting triggered (the softer emotions), what the reaction is (the reactive emotions) and how each person in the couple experiences these. Couples tend to start feeling closer, have more intimate moments and report fighting or distancing less. But that’s not the end of the story.

In order for more significant change to happen in the relationship, couples need to take the next step in therapy. It’s important to learn how to let the partner know what’s going on and to reach out for the soothing and comfort that’s needed. This is what we do next in therapy. The couple, each partner in turn, reaches underneath to find more vulnerable emotions – identifying what they are afraid or ashamed of, communicating this to their partner to receive comfort and soothing. This part of therapy can be powerful and healing. We often work on those injuries I mentioned earlier at this point.

As a therapist, what keeps me going in this wonderful but sometimes challenging work is the transformation that I’ve seen in many couples. From painful, negative cycles to collaborative, supportive and compassionate positive cycles, where couples often recapture the kind of closeness and safety they had in the beginning of their

relationship or create that safety and closeness for the first time. Welcome to the world of EFT!