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Clarifying the Negative Cycle in Emotionally Focused Therapy

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Introduction

The model of emotionally focused therapy can be seen to draw on two overall basic techniques: (1) *Clarifying the negative cycle* is necessary for the first change event of *de-escalation*, and (2) *deepening emotional experience* – especially of attachment fears and longings – is needed for the two transformative change events of the second stage of EFT. Clarifying the negative cycle involves assembling the process of emotion as it is triggered between two partners caught in negative cycles of separation distress (Johnson 2004; Johnson and Brubacher 2016). It is a collaborative process of clarifying what each partner does that unwittingly pulls the other partner into the cycle and identifying each partner's unacknowledged attachment emotions that are pulling him/her repeatedly into this reactive pattern.

Theoretical Framework

Clarifying the negative cycle, a process used in the first stage of emotionally focused therapy (EFT), is based on the view that it is neither lack of insight nor conflict that leads to relationship dissolution. Rather, it is attachment partners' failure to repair and reconnect following relationship ruptures that erodes a relationship (Huston et al. 2001). Since negative self-reinforcing feedback loops block repair and reconnection, *clarifying this negative cycle* is the first change event on the path toward reshaping a distressed relationship.

A Systemic, Experiential, Attachment-Oriented Process

The technique of clarifying a distressed couples' negative cycle is rooted in the tripartite systemic, experiential, and attachment orientations of EFT. The systemic view is that self-reinforcing repetitive patterns of demand-pursue/withdraw-defend characterize distressed couple relationships and perpetuate the distress (Gottman 1994; Bertalanffy 1968). The experiential view is that therapeutic change occurs when therapist and clients engage with present-moment emotional experience, to access awareness of the unfolding process of emotion. *Emotion clarifies needs*, primes action responses, organizes social interaction, and creates meaning (Arnold 1960; Ekman 2003/2007).

The view of attachment theory (Bowlby 1982; Johnson 2013; Mikulincer and Shaver 2016) is that distressed partners become stuck in mis-attempts at regulating attachment insecurities and seeking secure connection (using strategies of anxious hyperactivating or avoidant suppression) that paradoxically heighten insecurity. Clarifying the repetitive negative interaction cycle as the problem creates a safe base from which to attend to the attachment fears and unmet needs driving the cycle (Johnson 2004) so as to reprocess the attachment emotions into signals of mutual reaching and responding to one another.

Typical Negative Cycles

Variations of the basic demand-pursue/withdraw-defend negative cycles of interaction are seen in several typical cycles described below. The descriptions identify the insecure attachment strategies (Mikulincer and Shaver 2016) that make up these cycles.

Pursue/withdraw. Critical, demanding pursuits of a more anxious pursuer trigger avoidance and distancing in the other and vice versa.

Attack/attack. One partner is likely using a more anxious attachment strategy, hyperactivating his/her attachment needs and relentlessly pursuing connection. The more avoidant partner may be fighting back in self-defense, continuing to minimize his/her own and others' attachment needs.

Withdraw/withdraw. Withdraw/withdraw couples seldom argue, and seldom get close. Some have occasional blow-ups when an emotionally raw spot is touched. Both default to avoidant positions of not counting on or trusting the other.

Rationale for Clarifying the Negative Cycle

Clarifying the negative cycle as the basic problem in relational distress is one of the depathologizing aspects of EFT. Partners in distress are encouraged to discover that their problem is not a deficit in oneself or in the other partner, but is the

repetitive cycle that they are inadvertently triggering when either partner senses rejection or abandonment.

Increasingly Informed by Attachment

Clarifying the negative cycle is primarily a systemic process that has been part of EFT since its inception (1985). It is, however, inseparably integrated with attachment-oriented experiential techniques (empathic reflection, validation, evocative responses and questions, and empathic conjectures). As EFT was increasingly shaped by attachment theory, it evolved from the first integration of systemic and experiential approaches (Johnson and Greenberg 1985), to an approach in which each of the systemic and experiential interventions are reflective of attachment themes and reactions to a threat to the attachment bond (Johnson 1996, 2004).

Process of Emotion

The view that emotion and interaction patterns are both systemic processes (Johnson and Greenberg 1985; Johnson 2004) is an explicit part of EFT. *Clarifying the negative cycle* essentially consists of ordering the interactive process of emotion as it is triggered between attachment partners and, in doing so, accessing the specific underlying attachment fear of each partner that is propelling the reactive cycle.

The EFT therapist helps partners to assemble elements of emotion – cue, cognitive appraisal, bodily arousal, and action tendency – to gain access to the core attachment emotions that are driving the process but are not yet in conscious awareness or formulated in words. For example, to assemble and order a more withdrawn partner's emotion and access a core primary fear of rejection, an EFT therapist will evoke and validate the different elements of emotion, metaphorically opening doorways of: (1) the cue which is perceived as threatening (such as a partner's harsh tone of voice); (2) the cognitive appraisal made of that cue ("I'm letting him/her down again."); (3) the bodily sensation experienced when that cue is perceived (tension in the stomach, as the body prepares for fight or flight); and (4) the auto-

matic action tendencies (e.g., defend/withdraw) and reactive secondary emotional expressions (e.g., anger and numbness).

Description of Clarifying the Negative Cycle

Clarifying the negative cycle includes identifying the following aspects:

1. *Action tendencies*: Identifying the steps in the dance of distress: Outlining the behaviors in a couple's negative cycle from the story they tell and from observing and capturing the cycle as it happens in session. Their typical responses are linked together in a self-perpetuating loop, such as "the more s/he _____, the more s/he _____." The typical positions of anxious attachment *pursuit* or avoidant suppression and *withdrawal* are identified.
2. *Danger cues*: Naming the specific danger cues to which each partner reacts. Clarifying what it is that one partner does (a behavior, a voice tone, a gesture) that is typically perceived by the other partner as a danger cue or a threat to the attachment bond of secure connection.
3. *Linking action tendencies to perceived threats*: Helping partners acknowledge and express their steps in the dance ("I do shut down, when I hear a harsh tone." "I do lash out when I see you shrug.") and validating how normal and natural these moves are, in the context of perceived threat.
4. *Attachment meanings*: Helping partners acknowledge and express the meanings they make of the other partner's self-protective behaviors by evoking and reflecting attachment meanings that trigger or get triggered in the cycle ("What did it say to you Andie, that she was late?" "What does his loud outburst followed by his silence say to you, Bella?")
5. *Secondary emotions*: Attuning to, and validating the reactive, secondary emotions of each partner (When pulled into emotional imbalance Bella is angered by Andie's distance; Andie is briefly frustrated, followed by numbness.)
6. *Safety*: Maintaining emotional safety by "catching bullets" when necessary. Reframing aggression with a validating attachment reframe; e.g., "When you don't know how to tell her how unwanted you feel, it is so easy to slip into frustration and attempts to shut her down."
7. *Primary emotion*: Validating the attachment meanings and evoking the underlying attachment emotional music that drives the dance of disconnection and fuels distress. Both partners typically feel lonely. Withdrawers commonly fear rejection and nonacceptance, while pursuers commonly fear abandonment. Withdrawers typically view their partner as unpredictable and feel safer staying distant, whereas pursuers are likely to view self as unlovable and the other as unavailable for closeness.
8. *Summarizing the negative cycle*, the fears that trigger it and the attachment consequences of this cycle for both partners: "Bella, the more you complain about his distance and try to pull him close, Andie the more hear you're letting her down and the more you angrily shut her out. When he shuts down, Bella, you become frantic and aggressive. Underneath, Bella you are lonely and afraid you'll lose him at any moment and Andie, you're afraid she doesn't really love and accept you. This cycle takes over, leaving you both feeling alone and unwanted."
9. *Framing the dance of distress* as the common enemy and helping couples to step out of it in session. It then becomes something they can contain and move beyond. Simple attachment frames can be offered for different cycles and attachment positions of pursuit or withdrawal. An attachment frame for a pursue/withdraw couple could be: "The more Bella turns up the volume, the more Andie steps farther away." Both are trapped in pain and isolation." A withdraw/withdraw couple's cycle could be reframed as, "The more Cy walks away, looking unhappy (*with me*, Jess assumes), the more Jess walks away and gets busy (to numb the pain of isolation), and both are trapped in pain and loneliness."

Case Example

Bella and Andie sit in sullen silence, for a few minutes before Andie mumbles a complaint about how Bella can never be ready on time. A plethora of criticisms tumble forth from Bella, while Andie's eyes turn down and his arms fold across his chest. He disappears into stony silence.

Therapist: This is a very difficult moment – both of you feeling the other one upset with you! (*reflection and validation*). Right now, Bella you looked at Andie fold his arms and go silent, and you became very agitated. Your voice sped up as you recounted many struggles of the past few days. You sound very frustrated!” What happened for you Bella as you heard Andie's complaints over your being late?”

Bella: I heard, “Here we go again!” – I've tried for years to tell him he is good enough, that I am so proud of him, that I just want him to open up to me, but he is always on guard, ready to defend himself and put the blame on me – then he won't talk to me for days.

Therapist: So you hear Andie's complaint and you hear that you are being shut out, that he is pulling away from you and you become desperately frustrated, trying to tell him he has no reason to shut you out – yes?

Bella: Exactly!

Therapist: And Andie, just before Bella exploded with her frustration at you, you were saying how angry you are that she was late to come to this appointment. (Andie nods definitively.) Can you tell me what it means to you when she is late?

Andie: “That I'm not enough for her to care about getting ready on time!”

Therapist: Ah, so is this how many of your unhappy times play out? Andie, what you hear that is that Bella is

dissatisfied with you (*cue*). You are on guard for little signs (*limbic appraisal*) that she cares (*attachment meaning*), and when she forgets something or is late, your massive concern that you are not measuring up in her eyes (*more attachment meaning*), rips through your heart (*bodily arousal*) and before you know it, you fire back in defense (*action tendency*) and step far, far away from the trigger of your pain (*action tendency*). And Bella, you live on the edge of fear (*limbic appraisal*) that he is going to turn away from you, looking for ways to pull him close and grasping for messages that you are precious to him (*action tendencies/meaning making*), getting annoyed each time you sense even a hint (*limbic appraisal*) that he is stepping back or going silent – is that it?”

The cycle continues to get triggered in the session. Each time it does, the therapist tracks what is happening, validating their reactions, and reflecting any hints of their underlying fears and attachment distress. By the end of Stage 1, Andie and Bella have clarified their dominant negative cycle and begun to understand how they trigger this cycle in each other. Bella is beginning to grasp, “You shut me out (*action tendency/position of withdrawal*) because you think I don't care (*attachment meaning*). You are looking for signs that I care about you.” Andie is absorbing a new sense of Bella: “You get angry with me (*action tendency/position of demand-pursue*) because you are afraid I'll turn away from you and shut you out” (*primary fear of abandonment*). Clarifying this automatic self-protective cycle, each partner also touches the underlying attachment fears that leave them each so vulnerable to this negative pattern: Bella fears Andie is not available when she needs him – that he could disappear at any time; Andie dreads signals from Bella that he is

unimportant to her – fearing he is not measuring up in her eyes.

After both partners engage in the process of clarifying the negative cycle, and acknowledge and disclose to each other the underlying attachment fears propelling their reactive moves, the first change event of EFT is complete. Partners have named the basic negative cycle.

Through the de-escalation process of clarifying the negative cycle, partners discover new views of one another. Pursuing partners who previously seemed randomly hostile are now recognized as desperately seeking connection and protesting the other partner's emotional distance. Withdrawn partners who previously appeared nonchalant and uncaring are now understood to be distancing to protect themselves from criticism and rejection. This first event of de-escalation establishes sufficient emotional safety and awareness to begin the transformative change events of Stage 2.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Attachment in Couples and Families](#)
- ▶ [Attachment Injury Resolution Model in Emotionally Focused Therapy](#)
- ▶ [Attachment Theory](#)
- ▶ [Deepening Emotion and Restructuring the Attachment Bond in Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy](#)
- ▶ [Emotion in Couple & 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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