

# Why EFT Works

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Albert Einstein said, "All knowledge is experience, everything else is just information." There's a lot of information out there for couples and many people find the information helpful as they seek to understand their struggles. And such information *is* helpful. However, when we're stuck in negative relationship patterns, we need new *experiences*, based on new *emotions*, to change the pattern. That's the knowledge Einstein is talking about.

Emotions are like that proverbial snake that would bite you. We acknowledge they're there but too often we misunderstand the role they play in this dance of intimacy. Emotions seem to be the problem not the solution. And it's true; emotions can seem to be the problem. They can lead you to say and do hurtful things you otherwise wouldn't say or do. Negative emotions can override all the good thinking and action plans that you try to remember when you and your partner are in conflict. They can even change the "story" we tell ourselves about the "true" nature of our relationship. But emotions are supposed to be that powerful! Just think about it...like that Etta James classic, "*At Last*," powerful emotions got you together in the first place--those profound emotions of "*lonely days are over*," "*a thrill that I have never known*," and "*you are mine at last*." Truly in those moments, life *is* like a song! This profound connection is what it's all about and it's why it hurts so much when it seems to disappear. But rather than emotions being the problem, they are the solution if we know how to use them that way. Thus, we have *Emotionally Focused Therapy for Couples*.

## Defining the Problem Differently

When we're in conflict with our partner, our *reactive* emotions often get in the way and we find ourselves in negative relationship cycles. What we need to do is understand the



“cycle” and the emotions that get triggered. Then, we need to reach out, leaning toward our partner for help rather than turning away from them in hurt and fear. But in the cycle, it’s too frightening, and the things we do in response to fear, especially in our relationships, can escalate into very hurtful interactions. Still, even our most counterproductive behaviors make good sense when we understand them in the context of threatened connection with our partner—it’s just that neither our partners nor we can see this when we’re in the middle of the cycle. When the triggered emotions aren’t dealt with successfully, attack and defensiveness or avoidance and stonewalling begin and the continuing negative cycle causes connections to dissolve and the love to disappear. It is these negative cycles, *not our partner and not our emotions*, that are the problem. This is so important. When these negative interaction cycles emerge, we often need help to change them. The most powerful way to do that is to work with the emotions each partner is experiencing, but in a different way than is commonly understood. If this were easy, we’d do it by ourselves. It’s not really that hard when you know what to do and you don’t have to do it alone.

## Emotionally Focused Therapy

Unlike other approaches to couple therapy, Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFT), developed by Sue Johnson, Ph.D., pays profound attention to the emotions both partners have around their longing for love and connection (seeing all the moves in the relationship dance from attachment research). In EFT, we understand how each person's experience has validity (not how one person is right and the other wrong) and look to see how both individual histories as well as present-day interactions (the cycle) contribute to primary (vulnerable) emotions like insecurity, fear, loneliness, and inadequacy. Too often, these more vulnerable emotional experiences are lost in the cyclical exchanges we have with our partners. In their place, secondary (defensive) emotions like anger, blame and hostility or numbness and indifference are exchanged. When this happens, all we see is the anger and criticism or the withdrawal and aloofness. We then make up stories to explain what we see--negative stories about us, about our partner, and about the relationship. It is this *cycle* (the cascade of secondary emotions, negative stories we create to “understand” what’s happening, and our actions in response to these emotions and stories) that cripples a loving relationship; disabling partners from coming together with the warmth and love they once knew. Without help,



it's easy to lose sight of the fact that the *primary* emotions of fear, loneliness, inadequacy and insecurity are all about the loss of the closeness and connection that used to be there.

## There is Help

Just understanding that this is what's happening is an important start but it's only the first step. Couples in distress need to really understand this negative cycle, this spiraling cascade of secondary emotions, negative stories, and reactive behavior patterns. Again, they need to see that their cycle is the problem, not their partner. What's necessary is to access those more vulnerable feelings underneath it all and speak to each other about the deeper emotions at play. (That's a scary step and often help is needed to get started). Next, the biggest risk of all is to reach toward the partner and speak directly to them from this more vulnerable place of longing for reconnection and understanding.

Now the couple is approaching a powerful moment of reconciliation and in the beginning, as much as it's wished for, it is often hard to trust. The tendency is to reject this new, more vulnerable request for renewed connection because it's so unfamiliar; it goes against the stories we've told ourselves to make sense of the relationship up to now. Without help to hear and consider the realness of a different interaction pattern, the cycle can return and become more entrenched. However, with the help of EFT, new interaction patterns start to take root and both partners start to feel heard, understood, and appreciated--they start to feel safe with each other again. New stories then emerge to overwrite the old stories. Feeling closer to each other again, the *experience* of the relationship changes. It's a different dance; it's a different relationship. It feels very different and *that's* what we've been going for all along! Referring to Einstein's quote, is not just new *information* that's been obtained, it is a new *knowing* based on new *experience*.

## The Client is the *Relationship*

In EFT and in Hold Me Tight workshops, the client is the *relationship*, more than the people in the relationship. We are attending to the patterns, the emotions, the cycles,



and the steps each partner takes in the relationship dance. We want to help both partners change their contributions to this dance, learning new steps and moves. The goal is to help your relationship feel more successful and meet your needs in a way that will continue forward. Then, whatever life brings you and your partner, your relationship is what you each can turn to for comfort and support. This is what EFT does for relationships. Research has demonstrated improvement in relationship satisfaction even in 1 and 2 year follow-up studies with as few as 10-12 sessions of EFT. This is true even for couples with chronically ill children, one of the most "at-risk" types of couples therapists see in their offices. For couples where there has been abandonment, betrayal, or years of unresolved conflict, the process can take longer but it still works. In fact, I usually see both partners leaving the first or second session with a whole new perspective about their struggles. The light bulb goes off: It's not me, it's not them, it's this cycle! EFT offers a clear, understandable road map out of relationship strife and into restored bonds that endure and Hold Me Tight workshops are a profound start, sometimes all it takes for a couple to change at fundamental levels. As Etta James might say, "*At Last!*"

## EFT is Effective

In over twenty years of providing psychotherapy to individuals and couples, I have never seen a more effective approach to helping couples overcome distress and improve their relationships. Also, EFT's effectiveness is researched and documented voluminously in clinics all over North America. As one of our participants said, "Hold Me Tight is a GREAT way to get started on the path to a new and better relationship."

If Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy appeals to you, I invite you to consider a Hold Me Tight workshop for you and your partner.

