Sue Johnson at Work

A Review of

Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy for Clients Dealing With Infidelity

with Sue Johnson

doi: 10.1037/a0024666

Reviewed by
Susan Regas

In Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy for Clients Dealing With Infidelity, an American Psychological Association Psychotherapy Training Video (Series IV: Relationships), Sue Johnson demonstrates working with a couple as they struggle with issues surrounding infidelity. Extramarital affairs are one of the most difficult problems to treat in couple therapy (Baucom, Gordon, Snyder, Atkins, & Christensen, 2006). In an ethnographic review of conjugal dissolution across 160 societies, infidelity was the single most common cause of divorce (Betzig, 1989). Infidelity is frequently a precursor to seeking couple therapy, as it was for the couple in the video.

Introduction to Emotionally Focused Therapy

The video begins with an interview of Sue Johnson by Jon Carlson. Johnson introduces emotionally focused therapy (EFT; Johnson, 1996, 2008), a form of couple therapy that she developed. The therapy is based on John Bowlby’s attachment theory, and the interventions used in the therapy reflect the influence of Carl Rogers and Sal Minuchin.

The change process of EFT is mapped in three stages: (a) de-escalation of the problematic cycle in such a way that the couple can see the cycle and the distance and insecurity it fosters; (b) restructuring of attachment interactions by creating positive cycles of emotional responsiveness as partners are able to risk, disclose attachment needs and fears, and reach for and respond to each other; and (c) consolidation, in which partners communicate clearly about central issues and solve ongoing problems in the relationship.

According to Johnson, EFT is effective; numerous studies indicate that at least seven out of 10 couples improve, and the results are stable. She states that the difficulties some therapists encounter when attempting to do EFT occur because they are unable to develop a safe alliance with clients; they get caught up in content instead of dealing with the process, or they are uncomfortable dealing with emotions.

Following the presession interview, Johnson introduces the demonstration couple. This is the second marriage for both Lisa and Mike. Approximately two years ago, Lisa discovered that Mike was having affairs with work colleagues, and consequently the couple began EFT. In EFT, infidelity is seen as a potential attachment injury that (a) undermines the attachment bond between partners and (b) can be a devastating threat to attachment security that activates the deceived spouse’s attachment needs and fears and so creates a crisis (Johnson, Makinen, & Millikin, 2001).

Mike and Lisa report that they had previously addressed the affairs and had begun to restore trust. Recently, however, Lisa received several anonymous calls indicating that her husband was again involved with other women. Mike denied
any inappropriate relationships. After receiving the calls, Lisa immediately asked her husband to show her his work e-
mails to reassure her that the affairs were not going on. Although he had done this in the past to restore her trust, this
time he refused to open his computer. Lisa interpreted his refusal to mean that he was guilty. They have returned to
EFT therapy, and Johnson does a full session with this couple.

**Describing Why She Did What She Did**

The most interesting and valuable aspect of the video is the postsession interview with Jon Carlson. Carlson replays clips
of the session and asks Johnson to explain what she was doing and why she was doing it. According to Johnson, the
demonstration is a typical EFT session. Interestingly, twice during the session the clients mention that when Johnson
speaks, it feels as if they are talking to a female version of their male EFT therapist. Johnson appears pleased and
acknowledges that EFT involves a true structure and a clear way to deal with emotions.

At the beginning of the session, Johnson evaluates whether the couple is out of Stage 1 by assessing whether they have
de-escalated and have a handle on their negative interactions. Johnson indicates that she believes the couple is able to
create enough safety even after the phone calls. Even though they are disconnected from each other, they can “reach
for each other.”

Johnson tracks the negative cycle and reflects back to them the sequences of interaction. She reframes all of Mike and
Lisa’s responses in terms of attachment, talking often about lacking safety and about the need for self-protection. She
says the next task in EFT therapy is to get the more withdrawn partner (Mike, according to Johnson) more engaged in
Stage 2. She creates an enactment by facilitating Mike’s sharing with Lisa. According to Johnson, it is too unsafe for Lisa
to begin to risk, share, or trust until Mike is emotionally engaged and available. Johnson sees her job as getting Mike to
be more present, or there will be no safe haven. Her focus in the session is on Mike.

One important aspect of the approach is that Johnson validates both partners. The three of them agree that Mike does
not talk about serious or painful things. Johnson reassures him that he has come by this honestly, since society has not
taught men to be emotional, even though that is the only way out of this attachment injury. Johnson believes that if she
does not validate his inability to go deeply into his emotions, then he may go into shame.

Ideally, however, she would have gone further in the session with Mike so he could be more present and tolerate telling
his partner more about how overwhelmed he was. His being present is a prerequisite for the EFT therapist in order to
make it safe enough for Lisa to deal with her fear of being hurt and her worry about trusting him.

Interestingly, the reason Johnson believes she could not get further with Mike is because he is not ready to go into the
injury since he is too “overwhelmed by his emotions” because Lisa is so precious to him. On the other hand, Mike
indicates that he thinks that Johnson has not confronted him enough. Johnson predicts that within 10 EFT sessions, Mike
and Lisa will be more emotionally open and will ask for attachment needs to be met so that they can complete a positive
bonding.

When Carlson asks Johnson if she is concerned with honesty, she says she is very careful not to get into the truth of
whether Mike had once again had an affair. She says she does not want to be “sucked down the content tube” and
always gives people the benefit of the doubt. She says unless she gets clear signs that he is “totally bologna,” she is
going to trust his story.

In contrast, Mike’s wife does not believe his story. When Johnson says Lisa is “very scared of it happening again” and
will “need to know she is not going to be deceived again,” it appears that Johnson wants Lisa to give Mike the benefit of
the doubt as well. Johnson believes that secure attachment is based on a sense that you can depend on your partner
when you need him or her and that the partner will cherish and protect rather than reject or abandon you.

According to attachment theory, this emotional bond is a wired-in survival necessity. Threats to this bond, such as an
affair, activate Lisa’s primary fears of loss, isolation, and helplessness and amplify her need for comfort and soothing.
When talking to Mike, Johnson refers to Lisa as “your precious one” and “your lady” and not by name.
My assumption is that this is a way to encourage Lisa to see herself as important and cherished in Mike’s eyes. I believe it is very important to encourage Lisa to trust her own feelings and perceptions and see herself as important. The more she can trust herself and soothe and console herself, the more she will be able to move toward him—not because she needs him, but because she wants him.

**Useful Training Tape**

This video is designed to help seasoned practitioners and graduate students in training understand the concepts of EFT and how to apply them. Overall, the video is professionally done.

The format of the video, as structured by Jon Carlson, is particularly helpful. The viewer learns about the theoretical underpinnings of EFT, views an EFT session conducted by Johnson, and then sees a repeat of parts of the session, with Johnson explaining what she was doing.

**References**


