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The Couples Therapy Guide to EFCT

What Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy is, how it works,
and why it may be the missing piece in your relationship.

APPROACH

EFCT / Attachment-Based

PREPARED BY

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WHY THIS GUIDE

You're not broken. You're stuck in a *cycle*.

Most couples who come to therapy aren't dealing with a lack of love — they're dealing with a pattern. A loop of hurt, reaction, and disconnection that feels impossible to step out of.

Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT) is one of the most well-researched therapeutic approaches for relationship distress in the world. Developed by Dr. Sue Johnson and rooted in attachment theory, it gives couples a clear, structured path out of those painful cycles — and into a deeper, more secure bond.

This guide breaks down what EFCT is, how it works, and what you can expect if you decide to pursue it. Whether you're considering therapy for the first time or looking to understand an approach you've heard about, this is a clear, compassionate starting point.

"The need to feel safe with our loved one is a primary survival need, written into our nervous systems."

— DR. SUE JOHNSON, CREATOR OF EFT

THE FOUNDATION

What Is EFCT, *exactly*?

EFCT stands for Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy. It's an evidence-based approach that helps partners identify and change the negative patterns that keep them stuck — by going deeper into the emotions underneath the conflict.

Instead of teaching communication scripts or conflict-resolution tactics, EFCT looks at *why* partners react the way they do. Most recurring conflict in relationships isn't really about the dishes, the finances, or who forgot to call — it's about deeper fears: *Am I enough for you? Do you really need me? Can I trust you'll be there?*

EFCT treats the **relationship pattern** as the problem — not either partner. When both people understand the cycle they're caught in and the attachment needs driving it, they can start responding to each other in new, healing ways.



The research is clear: 70–75% of couples who complete EFCT move from distress to recovery. 90% show significant improvement. It's one of the most studied couples therapy approaches in the world.

THE SCIENCE BEHIND IT

Attachment Theory & *Your Relationship*

EFCT is built on attachment theory — the idea that all humans are wired to seek and maintain close emotional bonds with key people in their lives. This isn't weakness. It's biology.

When we feel secure with our partner — emotionally accessible, responsive, and engaged — we thrive. When we don't, we panic. And that panic looks different for every person.

ATTACHMENT STYLE	CORE FEAR	TYPICAL REACTION	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE
Anxious / Preoccupied	Abandonment, not being enough	Pursue, escalate, cling	Texts frequently, needs reassurance, gets louder when disconnected
Avoidant / Dismissive	Overwhelm, losing self	Withdraw, shut down, go cold	Gets quiet, needs space, feels blamed or flooded
Disorganized / Fearful	Intimacy AND abandonment	Approach then pull back	Wants closeness but also pushes partner away
Secure	Low threat sensitivity	Can soothe and reconnect	Stays regulated, reaches for partner, repairs conflict well

THE CORE PROBLEM

The Negative Cycle — *The Real Enemy*

EFCT's most powerful reframe: **the cycle is the problem, not your**

partner. When couples understand the pattern they're both caught in, the blame lifts — and real change becomes possible.

Every couple in distress has a version of this loop. It might look different on the surface, but underneath it's always the same: two people with unmet attachment needs, reacting to each other in ways that make it worse.

PURSUE

The Pursuer

Feels disconnected → escalates to re-establish contact. May come across as critical or demanding.
Underneath: *"I just need to know you still love me."*

WITHDRAW

The Withdrawer

Feels flooded or blamed → pulls back to regulate. May seem cold or shut down. Underneath: *"I don't know how to fix this and I'm scared of failing you."*

FREEZE / COMPLY

The Appeaser

Feels unsafe → agrees to keep the peace but inwardly disconnects. Builds resentment and loneliness for both partners over time.

ATTACK / ATTACK

Mutual Escalation

Both partners feel unsafe and go on the offensive simultaneously. High-conflict, high-intensity — exhausting and damaging without intervention.

"When we see the dance we are both doing, we stop seeing each other as the enemy."

— CORE EFCT PRINCIPLE

HOW THERAPY PROGRESSES

The 3 Stages of *EFCT Therapy*

EFCT isn't open-ended. It follows a structured, research-backed roadmap with three distinct stages. Most couples complete it in 8–20 sessions depending on the depth of distress.

01

De-Escalation

SESSIONS 1–5 ·
STABILIZE

Identify the negative cycle. Map each partner's role and the deeper emotions underneath. Goal: reduce reactivity and stop blaming each other.

02

Restructuring

SESSIONS 5–15 ·
DEEPEN

Each partner begins expressing their deeper needs and fears — often for the first time. New emotional conversations build trust and responsiveness.

03

Consolidation

SESSIONS 15–20 ·
INTEGRATE

Celebrate what's changed. Build tools for future conflict. Leave with a shared story of how you found your way back to each other.

INSIDE THE ROOM

Key EFCT Techniques

Your Therapist Will Use

Here's what to expect in an EFCT session — and why each technique matters.



Tracking the Cycle

The therapist maps the couple's recurring pattern in real time — naming each person's moves and emotions as they happen in the room.

"I notice when you raise your voice, your partner goes quiet. Let's slow down and look at what just happened between you."



Enactments

The therapist asks partners to speak directly to each other about something emotionally meaningful — creating new relational experiences live in session.

"Can you turn and tell your partner what it's like when you feel them pull away?"



Validation & Empathic



Reframing

Reflection

The therapist reflects each person's experience with deep empathy — helping them feel truly heard, often for the first time in years.

"Of course you feel scared when there's silence — you've learned that silence means something is very wrong."

A harmful behaviour is re-contextualized with compassion — helping both partners see the need behind it, not just the surface action.

"What looks like stonewalling is actually him trying not to make things worse — he shuts down because he's terrified of losing you."



Heightening

The therapist amplifies a key emotional moment to help the person feel it fully — rather than deflecting, minimizing, or intellectualizing.

"Stay with that feeling for a moment. What's it like right now to admit that you need her?"



Softening Events

Pivotal moments where a typically defensive or withdrawn partner reaches toward their partner with vulnerability — a turning point in therapy.

"When he said 'I need you and I'm afraid you'll leave' — that was a softening event. Everything shifted."

IS THIS RIGHT FOR YOU?

EFCT Works Best

When You Recognize This

EFCT is highly effective for a wide range of couples — including those who feel like it might be too late.

- ☐ You keep having the same argument no matter how many times you try to resolve it
- ☐ One or both of you has started feeling more like roommates than partners
- ☐ There's been an affair, a major breach of trust, or a specific wound that never healed
- ☐ You love each other but don't know how to stop hurting each other
- ☐ One partner pursues and the other shuts down — exhausting for both
- ☐ You've tried other therapy before but it didn't get to the real issue
- ☐ Life transitions (new baby, loss, career change) have created unexpected distance
- ☐ Intimacy — emotional or physical — has decreased and you don't know why

 **Note:** EFCT is not recommended where there is active domestic violence or active untreated addiction. Unsure? Book a free consultation and we'll help find the right path forward.

REFLECTION EXERCISE

7 Questions to Ask *Yourself Tonight*

You don't need to be in crisis to benefit from EFCT. These questions are a gentle way to honestly check in on where things are.

- 1 When was the last time you felt truly emotionally close *together* ?
to your partner — not just physically present, but
really
- 2 Is there something important you need from your partner that you've
stopped asking for because it feels pointless?
- 3 Do arguments between you tend to follow the same pattern, even
when the topic changes?
- 4 When conflict happens, do you tend to pursue more or withdraw
more — and how does your partner respond?
- 5 If you could say one thing to your partner you've never fully
expressed, what would it be?
- 6 Do you believe your partner knows — really knows — how much
they mean to you? Would they say the same?
- 7 If things stayed exactly as they are for the next 5 years, how would
you feel about that?

Ready to break the cycle?

If any of this resonated, the next step is simply a conversation. Book a free 15-minute consultation — no commitment, no pressure.

BOOK YOUR FREE CONSULTATION

Or reach out directly at Nadia@novacounsellingservices.com · (403) 383-8390

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