



ATTACHMENT
COUPLE ATTACHMENT

Couple Attachment

LOVE
DOES HAVE
SOMETHING
TO DO
WITH IT

CAIL PALMER, MSW

BLAISIUS ERLINGER/GETTY IMAGES

As marriage and family therapists (MFTs), one of our primary tasks is to be able to respond in a therapeutically effective manner to distressed adult love relationships. Up until the most recent past, our therapeutic interventions have been attuned to a wide host of dimensions from individual pathologies to system change, while marginalizing the essential ingredient that defines the relationship—love. We lacked a theoretical construction of adult love and were left instead with Hollywood or love song portrayals, without a clear clinical conceptualization; we lacked effective ways to inter-

vene along this critical dimension. It is however now widely accepted that attachment theory fills this gap by postulating that all human beings develop attachments in early life that are not only important in childhood, but continue with us through our adult life (Bowlby, 1969). It is a wired-in human need to seek out and secure emotional connections with not only our parents and our children, but with our lovers, and it is attachment that provides the bond that sustains our love relationships long after the endorphins of romantic love have subsided. Positive attachments lead to the cre-

ation of a safe haven and a secure base for couples, which is optimal for both health and well-being, and also future individual development (Mikulincer, Florina & Weller, 1993). Guided by attachment theory, MFTs have a way to understand couples and their distress and to intervene effectively, and also to know the specific elements of a healthy and positive love relationship.

Essential Elements of Adult Love

The basic building blocks of adult intimacy are emotional accessibility and responsiveness. People need to know that

their partners will be there for them and respond to them, both physically and emotionally. It is essential that partners know that they matter to each other on a day-by-day basis and that they exist in each other's minds (Fonagy & Target, 1997). In order to define a love relationship as secure, there needs to be a demonstration of availability and acceptance, an offering of support and comfort, and an expression of love and desire. Partners need to know that they are significant to one another, and that there is a level of engagement that signals importance and value to the other. It is through emotion that this responsiveness is communicated and it is also the expression of negative emotion or the absence of emotion that signals a lack of attachment responsiveness (Johnson, 1996).

What distinguishes adult love relationships from all other relationships is sexuality. The act of making love between two lovers is what differentiates this relationship from that of a friend and it is an essential part of the attachment bond. Sexual activity results in the production of the hormone oxytocin, which produces feelings of relaxation, contentment, and a desire to remain connected to the lover resulting in the continuation of the relationship (Hazen, 2003). Valuing sexuality in an adult love relationship is vital because of its power to communicate emotional closeness and intimacy, while no sex and low sex marriages are more likely to be unsatisfying, negative and disconnected (McCarthy, 2003).

Influential Factors of Positive Attachment

Crisis points. It is generally believed that a positive attachment is important at all stages of life, from the cradle to the grave. Responsiveness and accessibility are critically important in a crisis, whether that be a sudden or traumatic event, or a developmental life transition. It is at these times that attachment needs are especially activated and heightened, and therefore a lack of responsiveness by a loved one can inflict an injury to the relationship and redefine the relationship as insecure (Johnson, Maikinen, & Millikin, 2001). There is evidence mount-



RONNIE KAUFMAN/GETTY IMAGES

Partners need to know that they are significant to one another, and that there is a level of engagement that signals importance and value to the other.

ing to suggest that responsiveness and accessibility between a couple at important times like the birth of a new baby (Keeney, Houlas, Noller, & Alexander, 2001) or in old age can lead to greater emotional adjustment and growth for the individual and the relationship.

Attachment styles. How responsive and accessible one can be in an adult romantic relationship is influenced both by the early childhood experience and the current relationship dynamic. As adults, we respond to our partners based on our representations of self and other developed in childhood, which determines our attachment styles or strategies with our adult love mate. Bowlby (1969; 1973; 1980) outlined the working models of self and other, which constitute expectations of self and other in close relationships. Whether one has a secure or insecure attachment style can influence how comfortable one feels in getting close or depending on others. If early history has taught one that the caregivers were not responsive or accessible, he or she may begin to believe that significant others cannot be trusted and that closeness will lead to hurt (Hazen & Shaver, 1987). There are three variants of insecure attachment strategies: anxious, dismissive and disorganized. Anxious strate-

gies include a preoccupation with the attachment figure and proximity seeking behaviors, whereas avoidant strategies include a dismissal of the attachment figure and avoidant behaviors. The influence of gender on attachment styles has been found to have some significance. Moretti & Holland (2003) found that for the group of individuals with anxious attachment styles there tended to include a predominance of females, whereas the avoidant attachment style group had a predominance of males.

Couples with insecure attachment styles are more likely to encounter relationship distress, as they have developed ways of protecting themselves in relationships that create and maintain this distress. For example, in disorganized attachment, often as a result of trauma inflicted by an attachment figure, there are both anxiously seeking and fearfully avoiding behaviors. It becomes understandable, then, that a client who has encountered an early traumatic history may both long for and fear closeness, and then demonstrate behaviors that reflect this dilemma, including both anxiously seeking, and at the same time, rejecting closeness with a partner.

The patterns of interaction in the current relationship are, however, a

greater influence on attachment strategies. A lack of responsiveness by the attachment figure will automatically cue separation distress, which leads to a flight, fight or freeze response. These reactions are then expressed in negative interactional patterns that generally include one partner in a criticize-pursue response, followed with the other partner in a placate-withdraw reaction. Both of these responses invite and reinforce each other, which then define the relationship as insecure and result in the couple emotionally and physically disconnecting. When couples come to therapy, they are exhibiting these negative patterns, and by the end of Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), the couple are exhibiting interactional patterns that are more characteristic of a secure relationship; in that partners are able to talk openly about their attachment needs and are able to seek and receive comfort and support.

Implications for Therapy

The good news for MFTs is that attachment strategies are not rigid; they are malleable and can be influenced by a positive adult love connection. Studies have demonstrated that 30% of research participants change attachment styles over time (Scharfe, 2003). While the predictors of change are not well documented in adulthood, the provision of a secure base and a safe haven can make a positive difference. How the partner responds will either reinforce the insecurity through negative communication patterns, or alternatively increase security through responsive and accessible behavior patterns (Davila, 2003). If a partner can be responsive and caring in relation to an insecurely attached loved one, there is the possibility for the development of an earned felt security. Effective couple therapy can then be aimed at not only deescalating negative interactional patterns, but also increasing the ability to talk about attachment needs and to respond in a positive emotional way through the expression of supportive and empathic responses.

The creation and maintenance of a secure base and safe haven for a couple is

dependent on both the provision of and receiving of support, comfort, caregiving, and loving behaviors. Relationship distress is a result of the lack of these positive responses and instead a pattern of relating that is comprised of either negative, reactive emotions or numbed-out, marginalized emotions. MFTs should focus on modifying these negative patterns by accessing softer, more vulnerable emotions that elicit positive responses from their partner and help to begin to define the relationship as a place where one can confide deeper feelings and have one's attachment needs met. Emotionally Focused Couples therapy is an attachment based therapy model that has been clinically validated through research and found to be consistently effective in treating distressed adult love relationships. EFT provides a map for the couple and clinician to follow to both deescalate negative interactional cycles and to restructure and shape positive interactional patterns in order to facilitate greater emotional intimacy and closeness, and to repair, restore and maintain the couple attachment bond.

MFTs are in an exciting stage of development in the field as attachment theory and research continue to grow and answer the many questions and quandaries of adult love. As clinicians, we are no longer in the dark about the mystery of love, but have concrete evidence to guide us in our everyday work with couples suffering in distressed relationships.

The therapy models being developed out of this work are providing MFTs with valid and effective ways to make a real difference to our clients and their most important relationships. Attachment theory gives MFTs a map to help clients create and maintain securely attached relationships. These safe havens provide the emotional sustenance and nurturance necessary to allow people not only to stay connected, but also to live healthy and vital lives. MFTs can make differences with couples who are sustained because of the ability to go to the heart of what really matters in adult relationships—love. ○



GAIL PALMER, MSW, is a co-founder of the Ottawa Couple and Family Institute and a Clinical Member and

Approved Supervisor of the AAMFT. She teaches family therapy at Carleton University in Ottawa and is a supervisor and trainer in Emotionally Focused Therapy.

REFERENCES

- BOWLBY, J.** (1969). *Attachment and loss*. Vol. 1: *Attachment*. New York: Basic Books.
- BOWLBY, J.** (1988). *A secure base*. New York: Basic Books.
- BRADLEY, J., & Palmer, G.** (2003). Attachment in later life: Implications for intervention with older adults. In S. M. Johnson & V. Whiffen (Eds.), *Attachment processes in couple and family therapy* (pp.281-299). New York: Guilford Press
- DAVILA, J.** (2003). Attachment processes in couple therapy. In S. M. Johnson & V. Whiffen (Eds.), *Attachment processes in couple and family therapy* (pp. 124-143). New York: Guilford Press
- HAZEN, C.** (2003). The essential nature of couple relationships. In S. M. Johnson & V. Whiffen (Eds.), *Attachment processes in couple and family therapy* (pp. 43-63). New York: Guilford Press
- JOHNSON, S. M.** (2003). Introduction to attachment: A therapist's guide to primary relationships and their renewal. In S. M. Johnson & V. Whiffen (Eds.), *Attachment processes in couple and family therapy* (pp. 103-123). New York: Guilford Press.
- JOHNSON, S. M.,** (2004). *Creating connection: The practice of emotionally focused couple therapy, 2nd Ed.* New York: Brunner- Routledge.
- JOHNSON, S. M.,** Bradley, B., Furrow, J., Lee, A., Palmer, G., Tilley, D., & Wooley, S., *The emotionally focused couples therapy workbook*. New York: Brunner-Routledge.
- MCCARTHY, B., & McCarthy, E.** (2003). *Rekindling sexual desire: A step-by-step program to help low-sex and no-sex marriages*. New York: Brunner-Routledge.
- SCHARFE, E.** (2003). Stability and change of attachment representations from cradle to grave. In S. M. Johnson & V. Whiffen (Eds.), *Attachment processes in couple and family therapy* (pp.64-84). New York: Guilford Press.