

Using Attachment Theory Concepts In Couple Therapy

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Attachment Theory helps us understand differences in the way people relate to each other, regulate affect and work through conflicts. Therefore, it can provide useful insights for couple therapy. According to John Gottman (1995), a leading marriage researcher, how couples interact with each other helps to determine how successful their relationship will be. He found that happy couples had a ratio of five positive interactions to one negative interaction. He suggests that in order to provide lasting effects for couples in therapy, therapists must help the partners increase positive affect, decrease negative affect and resolve conflicts effectively (Gottman, 2000). Attachment theory can add a new dimension to our understanding of how couples interact so that these goals can be realized.

Attachment Theory explains differences in the relational styles of children and adults. The theory describes the way parent and child bonds develop and how these bonds reflect the interactions between the dyad. Parents who are emotionally and physically available to their children, who have a sense of how their children are feeling and who are reliably responsive to their child's signals either of distress or for connection have children who are classified as securely attached. Parents who are often unavailable to their children or who do not accurately, sensitively and reliably respond to their child's signals of distress or for connection have children who are described as insecurely attached. These two general categories develop within the first year of life and usually persist into adulthood. Eventually as the child matures into adulthood, these styles determine how individuals interact with others in close personal relationships beyond the parent child dyad. When adults form intimate relationships with others, these bonds reflect the styles of attachment that the individuals bring to the relationship. Thus it makes sense that we can use the concepts developed through Attachment Theory to understand how people interact in intimate relationships and to use this understanding to help couples in distress.

Adult Attachment Styles:

Mary Main (1997) has described four styles of adult attachment derived from her research with the Adult Attachment Interview, a semi-structured questionnaire that seeks to determine the state of an individual's mind with respect to his or her attachment history. These styles reflect how a person will relate to another in a close personal relationship based on their conscious and unconscious preconceptions of the way others will respond to them.

1. **The secure/autonomous style:** These individuals are characterized by two qualities. They deeply value attachment-related experiences and they have an accurate understanding of and perspective on important relationships in their lives. They demonstrate a forgiving attitude toward their attachment figures from the past and in the present. They show compassion for others. They speak coherently about how their past has influenced their present feelings and relationships.
2. **The dismissing style:** These individuals are generally dismissive of the effects of attachment related experiences. They tend to deny that attachment experiences had any influence on their present behavior. They often paint a positive picture of their childhoods which is not born out in the experiences they recount about their childhoods. They often describe their parents and their childhoods as very normal. They also tend to lack memory of significant childhood events.
3. **The preoccupied style:** These individuals are so preoccupied with early or current relationships with their own parents that they have difficulty being objective about them or accurately evaluating them. They tend to be angry and preoccupied with parental faults even in the present. Or their descriptions of their relationship with their parents are vague, confused and contradictory. They tend to go on and on about these early relationships without drawing coherent conclusions.

4. **Unclassifiable:** There were a small proportion of individuals who switch from the dismissing to the preoccupied styles and therefore could not be classified. This population is more likely to be psychiatrically distressed or have a history of criminal activity.

These findings imply that differing states of mind about attachment will result in differences in interactions in intimate relationships. The individual with a secure/autonomous style has the expectation that intimate relationships will be generally positive and satisfying, that partners will have their best interests in mind and will understand them a good deal of the time. They are more objective in the way they see their family and their partners. In a research article by Hazan and Shafer (1987) the authors describe individuals in this category.

Secure lovers described their most important love experience as especially happy, friendly, and trusting. They emphasized being able to accept and support their partner despite the partner's faults. Moreover, their relationships tended to endure longer...Secure lovers said that romantic feelings wax and wane but at times reach the intensity experienced at the start of the relationship and that in some relationships romantic love never fades. (Hazan and Shafer, 1987, p. 515)

Individuals with the dismissing style of attachment will often devalue the importance of their intimate relationships. They do not trust in the good will of their partners and tend to believe that they cannot depend on anyone but themselves. They do not often share their deepest feelings with their partner. Hazan and Shafer report that this style was "characterized by fear of intimacy, emotional highs and lows and jealousy." They don't believe that romantic love lasts and they feel that intense love experiences are very rare. (Hazan and Shafer 1987 p.515)

Individuals with a preoccupied style of attachment tend to be very anxious and ambivalent in intimate relationships. They are often obsessed with their intimate partner and preoccupied with the security of the relationship. Their mind set is mistrustful and fearful. Hazan and Shafer describe this style as the most openly conflicted about love.

Anxious/ambivalent subjects (similar to Mary Main's preoccupied style) experienced love as involving obsession, desire for reciprocation and union, emotional highs and lows, and extreme sexual attraction and jealousy... The anxious/ambivalent subjects claimed that it is easy to fall in love and that they frequently feel themselves beginning to fall, although they rarely find what they would call real love. (Hazan and Shafer, 1987, p. 515)

When individuals become involved in an intimate relationship, the interpersonal dynamics reflect their conscious and unconscious perceptions of relationships as reflected in their attachment styles. For example, two securely attached lovers find their relationship generally harmonious and satisfying. They trust that they can depend on their partner's good will and feel that if difficulties or differences arise, they will find a way to resolve them. They experience many more positive interactions than negative interactions and they believe that they could allow themselves to be vulnerable with their partner. They are able to accept flaws or deficits in their partner without too much disappointment because they tend to focus on the positive qualities of their partner. As the relationship matures, the couple finds their intimacy deepening and their love for each other becoming stronger. These are couples who would not usually need couple's therapy unless some traumatic event occurs in their lives.

Two dismissing lovers develop a very different dynamic than the secure/autonomous couple. The initial attraction that develops quickly fades. Since they believe that their partner will disappoint them, they will seize on those times when the partner is not available to them or does not understand them and use this to justify their withdrawal. So this couple becomes less and less close over time and more and more defensive. The intimacy in the relationship suffers and they begin to lead separate lives. When and if they finally decide to come to couple's therapy, they are often emotionally distant from each other and have few common interests or activities. Often the dismissive couple will not come to therapy but rather drift apart until there is little left of the relationship to save.

Two preoccupied partners usually become involved in an exclusive relationship very quickly. They will spend a great deal of time with each other often to the exclusion of friends and other activities which may have been important to them prior to meeting. Initially they will feel very close and like minded but as the relationship progresses they become increasingly more disappointed with each other and the relationship. They often become demanding and critical. They may have frequent arguments which escalate to threats of breaking up. They have difficulty remaining calm when the partner frustrates or angers them. They may be unreasonably jealous. Stonewalling after an argument can occur. But they continue to make up even when they don't feel as if there has been an adequate resolution to their disagreements.

The couples in which one partner is dismissing and the other is preoccupied tend to become extremely polarized. This configuration occurs the most often because the differing styles help to sustain the relationship for a period of time. The partner with the preoccupied attachment style is usually anxious and demanding of more intimacy while the partner with the dismissing attachment style shuts down and withdraws. The preoccupied partner then becomes even more critical and dissatisfied and the dismissing partner becomes more distant and uncommunicative. There may be numerous breakups and makeup's as the couple experiences more conflict and/or more stonewalling, an emotional shutting down and shutting out of the partner. Some individuals who are preoccupied may express their ambivalence by having an affair but become extremely anxious and distressed if the partner threatens to leave them. Others who are preoccupied can become more demanding and critical of their partners, but even though they may threaten to leave never make good on that threat. These relationships can be explosive with the preoccupied partner blowing up and the dismissing partner stonewalling. Or both partners may stonewall. The dismissing partner is usually the one who decides to leave the relationship.

Relationships that involve one secure partner and one insecure partner are usually more functional and have fewer serious conflicts.(Johnson 2002) There is some evidence that if a secure partner and an insecure partner stay together for an extended period of time, the attachment style of the insecure partner becomes more secure. This makes sense because secure partners are more reliable, responsive and available, making the insecure partner begin to feel more positive, trusting and less anxious. But on occasion, the reverse can also be true with the insecure partner influencing the secure partner to become more insecure. (Feeney 1999)

Relationships in which there is serious physical or verbal abuse involve more complicated dynamics. They will not be discussed in this paper. Also relationships in which there is some sort of addiction such as drugs, alcohol, gambling or sexual are also more complicated and out of the scope of this discussion. If one or both partners are severely mentally ill, the attachment styles of the individuals can be less important than the effects of psychopathology on the relationship.

As a couple's therapist, it is important to understand the type of attachment styles of the couple and the dynamics brought about by the interaction of these styles in order to plan effective interventions. Since individuals with dismissing styles rarely seek psychotherapy, it is usually the partner with the preoccupied attachment style that wants to come for couple counseling. Talking about attachment styles is often a good way to avoid pathologizing the individuals and their relationship. This is especially reassuring to partners with dismissing styles as they rarely believe they have emotional problems but they can recognize that they withdraw or devalue relationships. Helping the preoccupied partner deal with their anxiety and negative mind set can also be very helpful. This partner struggles with their ambivalence. Helping them focus on the positive aspects of their partner may reduce their anxiety.

When one individual is dismissing and the other is preoccupied, identifying how they polarize brings them back from the extreme positions they have often taken. The preoccupied partner can be encouraged to back off from demands for intimacy and validation so that the dismissing partner has room to calm down. The dismissing partner can be encouraged to reach out and express their willingness to resolve conflicts which is very reassuring to the preoccupied partner.

If the couple is both dismissing in their attachment style, helping them to find common interests and activities is important. Also they need to be aware of their tendency to withdraw. They need to find ways to reconnect. They also need to be made aware of the value of relationships and helped to recognize the importance of their present relationship to them.

The couple with two preoccupied partners must first focus on calming down and resolving conflict more effectively. Then they need to be helped to reassure each other rather than constantly criticizing each other. In general there needs to be a sharing of positive emotional states and a feeling of connection and trust between the partners. Fostering these positive feelings is the challenge and the reward of couples' work. This may be difficult for partners who have an insecure attachment style because they tend to mistrust others ability to understand them and respond empathically to their need for connection. So helping them to focus on the positive qualities of the partner and working on increasing positive interactions is very important.

The goals of couples work from an attachment perspective involve helping the couple develop a more trusting and positive perception of the partner's ability to make connection and respond empathically to their need for understanding and reassurance. This leads to the type of positive interactions Gottman describes. Several basic elements of interpersonal relationships that foster emotional well being are described by Daniel Siegel (2002) a neurobiologist who uses Attachment Theory to explain differences in the way the brain develops in infants and young children. I have taken these elements and applied them to work with couples. For children, these ways of relating help to develop a strong sense of self and of well-being. For couples, these elements help establish a sense of well-being in the relationship and a feeling of being validated and appreciated. They create trust and foster connection.

1. **Collaboration:** Communication in a relationship should be based on an attunement of each of the partners to the non verbal signals of the other. It can feel so reassuring when partners are able to understand each other by creating a joining of two minds at a basic emotional level. In these instances the individuals "feel felt". Helping couples work toward this type of understanding can be very challenging. It entails helping them back off from their own feelings and needs in order to focus on understanding where the other person is coming from emotionally and having empathy for that place. When the relationship is particularly conflictual this type of collaboration is impossible because the partners are entrenched in their own perspective and overwhelmed by their feelings. So it may be necessary to work with each individual to find ways to calm down and become less defensive. Relationships that are collaborative build trust and provide the couple with interpersonal closeness.
2. **Reflective Dialogue:** This type of dialogue encourages the sharing of internal experiences or "states of mind". It allows individuals to talk about their "emotions, perceptions, thoughts, intentions, memories, ideas, beliefs, and attitudes." (Siegel 2002 p.51) A reflective dialogue helps to build emotional intimacy in the relationship. When couples can talk about their mental life it fosters connection and feelings of closeness. However, most couples who come for therapy have been disappointed when they have attempted to express their inner most feelings to their partner. So pointing out types of communication that are judgmental is a necessary first step. Then helping the couple to learn how to encourage the other person to express feelings and not criticizing them becomes an important goal.
3. **Repair:** When communication is disrupted by misunderstanding or conflict, repairing the rupture is an important part of reconnecting with the partner. Disruptions occur inevitably because couples can never be perfectly attuned or in synch with their partners. There will always be disagreements, miscommunications and failures of empathy. It is not these ruptures that create problems but rather how these ruptures are dealt with. If a couple can learn to repair these disconnections effectively, their ability to come back from the anxiety and frustration they cause is improved. The more often they can repair or heal the disconnections in the relationship, the less

they will be emotionally flooded and defensive when ruptures occur. People who have an insecure attachment style have a history of childhood experiences in which ruptures did not get repaired. They don't have faith that they will be repaired and often act in ways that bring about more disruption and disconnection. So helping these individuals stop destructive interactions and develop a more hopeful attitude toward repair is very important.

4. **Coherent Narrative:** Having a coherent narrative means understanding how past experiences are linked to present ways of perceiving self and others and how these perceptions affect behavior. It is a fundamental aspect of insight and self-awareness. Studies have shown that parents who have a coherent narrative are more likely to have securely attached children whether or not they themselves had insecure childhood attachments. (Main 1997) When partners have an understanding of how their pasts affected them, they are less likely to repeat dysfunctional interactions from their families of origin in their present relationships. Therefore, helping the individuals in a couple develop insight into how their past relationship affected them and how those relationships shaped their perceptions, feelings and responses in intimate relationships is a very important part of couple therapy from an attachment perspective.
5. **Emotional Communication:** Heightened moments of sharing positive emotional experiences is one of the joys of a good intimate relationship. When something wonderful happens, sharing it with the partner is usually the first thing that most people in good intimate relationships want to do. When the partner can respond by mirroring the joy of the other, the relationship bond is strengthened and a positive attitude toward the relationship is enhanced. This is a place where partners can find validation for their sense of self in relationship. It is equally important to be able to remain connected during times of intense negative emotion. This helps partners not to feel emotionally abandoned when they are experiencing difficult feelings. Often in couples who come for therapy, this emotional communication has never been established or there has been a disconnection when opportunities for connection occurred. So it is important for the therapist to help the couple work toward being able to establish this type of communication and experience its pleasures.

Thus the primary goal of couples' therapy from an attachment perspective is to help the couple develop a more secure attachment to the partner. This is accomplished by helping each partner become more secure in their individual attachment style, by helping the couple share positive emotions and feelings about each other more often and by helping them communicate more empathically with their partner. Each individual must also develop insight into how their childhood experiences influenced their perceptions of self and others particularly as it relates to their intimate relationship. The couple must learn how to remain relatively calm during conflict and work toward repairing affective ruptures. Finally they need to feel safe enough in the relationship to share deeper feelings and thoughts with their partner, fostering greater emotional intimacy. If the couple can accomplish these goals they will become more securely attached individually and in the relationship.

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