
The Use of Emotionally Focused Therapy with Separated or Divorced Couples

Le recours à la thérapie centrée sur l'émotion auprès des couples séparés ou divorcés

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ABSTRACT

Couples with children who are separated or divorced need to develop a plan for coparenting and the lifelong shared tasks of childrearing. While legally informed programs can offer mediation, these services can miss the underlying conflict that continues to plague postseparation couple relationships and, more importantly, their children. Divorce is a process with multiple transitions for a family, and the couples who separate or divorce may have a history of negative communication patterns that have long corroded their relationship. There is a need to develop a new coparenting relationship that can serve as a foundation for the long-term. The research literature varies in understanding the impact of divorce on children, but there is consistent agreement that parental conflict does affect child maladjustment. Emotionally focused therapy (EFT) is one effective means of working with a couple who are separated or divorced. EFT is an empirically supported couples' treatment that was developed from attachment, emotion, and systems theories. This article explores the use of Stage 1 of EFT for couples who are separated or divorced, using a case example to further illustrate the model.

RÉSUMÉ

Les couples séparés ou divorcés avec enfants doivent planifier la garde partagée et une répartition à long terme des tâches liées au rôle parental. Bien qu'il existe des programmes de médiation reconnus sur le plan juridique, les responsables de tels services peuvent ne pas percevoir le conflit sous-jacent qui continue de troubler la relation du couple après sa séparation et qui, plus important encore, comporte une incidence sur les enfants. Le divorce est une démarche qui connaît de nombreuses transitions au sein d'une famille, et les couples qui se séparent ou qui divorcent peuvent avoir développé des habitudes de communication négative qui minent leurs relations depuis longtemps. Il y a lieu d'élaborer une nouvelle relation de coparentalité qui pourra servir d'assisté à long terme. Bien que la littérature sur la recherche démontre une compréhension variable quant à l'incidence du divorce sur les enfants, on s'entend généralement sur le fait que le conflit entre les parents a des répercussions sur l'inadaptation de l'enfant. La thérapie centrée sur l'émotion (TCÉ) est un moyen efficace d'intervention auprès des couples séparés ou divorcés. Il s'agit d'un traitement conjugal soutenu empiriquement qui s'inspire des théories de l'attachement, de l'émotion, et des systèmes. Dans cet article, on explore le recours au premier stade de la TCÉ auprès des couples séparés ou divorcés, en se servant d'une étude de cas pour mieux illustrer le modèle.

Couples with children who are permanently separated or divorcing must consider how they will continue to coparent. There are several mediation and contract-based approaches to negotiating coparenting arrangements (see Chang, 2016). The ability to create a cooperative approach can be facilitated by postseparation counselling in which a couple has the opportunity to understand where they get stuck in their communication and find new ways of communicating that reflects an understanding of each other's needs. One means of doing this has been explored by the author via emotionally focused couples therapy (EFT) with separated and divorced couples.

Couples with children who are separated or divorced have to consider how they will stay connected and communicate to assist with the coparenting of their children. Research has long suggested that the consequences of divorce can be profound for the children of divorced parents (Amato, 2000). Divorce, especially in high-conflict situations, likely has more long-lasting adverse effects on children than amicable divorces where couples easily come to mutual coparenting agreements (Bing, Nelson, & Wesolowski, 2009; Rauh, Vath, & Irwin, 2016). Marital conflict, however, is a more important indicator of child adjustment than is divorce itself or postdivorce conflict (Buehler et al., 1998). It is common for parents to experience conflict in resolving important child-rearing differences, and some parents have a familial style of loud, argumentative discussions (Kelly, 2000). The research points to the need for former partners to peacefully and civilly navigate their differences in child-rearing (Bonach, 2005). One means of supporting this is the application of EFT, specifically Stage 1 of EFT, which is intended to de-escalate conflict and help partners to identify their positions in conflicts.

Conflict is a normal part of all relationships, and one of the more stressful and challenging tasks for separated parents is to redefine their coparental relationship (Bonach, 2005). For those parents stuck in a conflict cycle that continues unresolved and interferes with the development of a mutually supportive coparenting relationship, EFT provides an opportunity to create new, more positive communication patterns. EFT is a structured approach to repair distressed relationships (Johnson, 2004). It has also been used with families (Johnson, Maddeaux, & Blouin, 1998) and has demonstrated clinical effectiveness (Lebow, Chambers, Christensen, & Johnson, 2012).

This article will outline the issues facing separating couples dealing with children, the potential impacts of separation and divorce on children, and a means to improve communication between parents as they plan for the life-long shared tasks of raising their children. This will include a case study of parents of young children whose parents are headed for divorce, plan to coparent, and need to develop the ability to resolve conflict about parenting in ways with which they had struggled while married and which have escalated since their separation.

Starting with a description of divorce as a process as opposed to a single event that necessitates a relational and long-term approach to coparenting, I will then explore the risk factors that contribute to divorce that make couples counselling¹ complex with this population. The importance of developing a parental alliance

will be highlighted with research about the impact of parental separation and divorce on children. After a brief review of the styles of coparenting after separation, a description of the use of Stage 1 work of EFT with separated couples will be outlined and illustrated with a case example.

DIVORCE

The proportion of marriages in Canada that end in divorce has remained relatively stable over the last 20 years (i.e., 35–42%; Statistics Canada, 2011). The most recent available statistics projected that 40.7% of marriages would end in divorce before the 30th wedding anniversary (Statistics Canada, 2011). Similarly, in the United States, between 40% and 50% of first-married couples ultimately divorce (Cherlin, 2010). A commonly accepted theoretical model of divorce is a process perspective that includes stress, risk, and resilience (Greene, Anderson, Forgatch, DeGarmo, & Heatherington, 2012). Understanding divorce as a complex process that introduces a “chain of marital transitions and family reorganizations that alter roles and relationships, and affect individual adjustment” (Greene et al., 2012, p. 103) is important to understanding the complexities of coparenting after separation. Each new transition presents challenges that require adaptation, which is influenced by previous couple functioning and experiences.

The capacity to deal with the various stressors that are part of the separation or divorce process depends on a variety of protective and vulnerability factors. These factors include personal characteristics, family processes and relationships, and the ecological systems around the family, such as friends, extended family, school, workplace, available services, and the geographic location in which they live (Ungar, 2016). Developmental factors play a role in determining the impact of divorce as well. Adults and children alike may be more sensitive to the stressors associated with the myriad of transitions that divorce can include, which in turn can trigger a delayed response and adjustment to a divorce. A wide variety of responses are productive and healthy for dealing with the transitions involved in separation and divorce, thus there is no single prescription that determines the most positive outcomes for everyone involved. Theorizing divorce from a process model perspective underscores the importance of understanding that the parental relationship continues throughout the divorce process and long afterwards. What follows is an outline of the risk factors that contribute to divorce that can make counselling with such couples more challenging.

A number of factors are noted in the research as being associated with divorce. These include age when married, community characteristics such as employment rate and crime rate, and education level when married (Greene et al., 2012). The couples we see in our counselling practices who are separated or divorced may well be the couples who had been at higher risk of divorce due to a range of communication patterns that contribute to separation and divorce, which have been highlighted in the research. These corrosive communication patterns include interactions that involve reciprocation of negative affect or escalation, denial,

blaming (Hetherington, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), and what Gottman (1994) referred to as the “four horsemen of the apocalypse”: criticism, stonewalling, contempt, and defensiveness. Also noted in the research literature is the lack of spousal interdependence (Rogers, 2004).

Further complicating the work with couples who are separated or divorced are their individual mental health histories. For example, individuals who have a history of maladjustment problems such as antisocial behaviour, depression, alcohol/substance use, and impulsivity are more likely to experience relationship distress that ends in divorce (Hetherington, 1999; Kurdek, 1990). These maladjustment issues, along with the communication and environmental factors previously noted, can make counselling with separated couples more complex. Another factor to consider is the living arrangements of the children postseparation.

There is a trend in Canada toward joint custody in court-contested divorces. In 1995, 21% of contested divorces with children resulted in resolution of joint custody, while by 2002 the proportion had risen to 41% (Vanier Institute, 2004). Joint custody, however, rarely results in shared living arrangements, as most of the caregiving is still provided by mothers (Kelly, 2007). Mothers are still providing the majority of caregiving despite larger numbers of women working outside the home, men assuming more responsibility for children while married (Lamb, 2004), and research findings about the important contributions of both fathers and mothers to their children’s adjustment (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). For couples who arrange to share some or all parenting responsibilities, these new parenting arrangements are another factor to negotiate and for children to navigate.

Where both parents remain involved in some capacity with child-rearing, on one end of the continuum is parallel coparenting where there is little to no communication about, or coordination of, parenting efforts (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). This approach may serve to avoid conflict or reinforce the new boundaries between the parents, postseparation. However, it can lead to a range of problems, including challenges with monitoring children as they get older. On the other end of the continuum is collaborative parenting where there is frequent communication, coordination of parental efforts, and joint decision making. While there are a number of variations on postseparation parenting arrangements, it is important to note the impact on the children, regardless of the approach. What follows is a brief review of the research literature about the impact of divorce on children.

IMPACT OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN

Although the research about the impact of divorce on children is divergent and reports a large variety of negative, positive, and neutral outcomes, a consistent finding is that child maladjustment is strongly associated with parental conflict, both during and after the marriage (Greene et al., 2012). Conflict increases a variety of behavioural and emotional problems for children (e.g., Ayoub, Deutsch, & Maraganore, 1999; Emery, 1999). Davies and Cummings (1994) reported that observing hostility between their parents can be a dysregulating experience

that leads to children's heightened emotional reactivity. In addition, Crockenberg and Langrock (2001) identified that marital conflict has an influence on multiple gender-linked pathways for children's externalizing and internalizing behaviour. Further, children's appraisals of threat and blame, triangulation into parental conflict, and their emotional reactivity have all been shown to affect the relationship between child maladjustment and parental conflict (Cummings, Schermerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2006; Davies et al., 2002; Grych, Harold, & Miles, 2003; Grych, Raynor, & Fosco, 2004). Children who believe they caused their parents' conflict or feel responsible for ending or resolving the conflict may blame themselves (Grych & Fincham, 1993).

Children's self-blame may elicit shame as a result of their perception of threat when experiencing parental conflict and the accompanying fear. Children's appraisals of threat are associated with internalizing problems, while self-blame predicts both internalizing and externalizing problems (Grych & Cardoza-Fernandez, 2001). Children experiencing parental conflict describe feelings of being torn or caught between their parents (Afifi, 2003). Experiencing being drawn into parental conflict increases the probability of child adjustment problems (Amato & Afifi, 2006). Thus, there is a need to work with couples who are separated and a need to plan for life-long contact and communication with each other about their children.

The following is a description of emotionally focused therapy (EFT) based on the author's experience with Stage 1 work of EFT. It has been an effective means to help couples identify their conflict cycles and develop new communication patterns that facilitate productive coparenting strategies as they navigate their relationship postdivorce or separation.

EMOTIONALLY FOCUSED THERAPY

EFT is an empirically supported treatment that arose from emotion theory and attachment theory formulated in the early 1980s by Johnson and Greenberg (1987, 1988). While Johnson (2004) has gone on to further develop the research and practice of EFT, it differs from emotion-focused therapy that has been the focus of Greenberg (2002). One of the key differences is the integration of attachment theory into EFT and the systemic focus on the couple's relationship. The practice of EFT views emotions as centrally important in the experience of self, in both adaptive and maladaptive functioning, and in therapeutic change. From the EFT perspective, change occurs by means of awareness, regulation, reflection, and transformation of emotion taking place within the context of an empathetically attuned relationship. The goals of EFT are to expand and reorganize key emotional responses, create a shift in partners' interactional positions and initiate new cycles of interaction, and foster the creation of a secure bond between partners (Johnson, 2004).

EFT includes three stages with a series of steps in which partners can explore key issues that are interfering with their relationship. These steps include delineating conflict issues in their core struggles, identifying their negative interaction cycle,

accessing unacknowledged feelings, reframing the problem in terms of underlying feelings, promoting identification with disowned needs and aspects of self, promoting acceptance of the partner's experience, facilitating the expression of needs and wants, facilitating the emergence of new solutions, and consolidating new positions. "From a systemic perspective the task of the EFT therapist is to use the emotional experience of the spouses, to change interactions by evoking new responses which motivate reciprocal positive behavior in the partner" (Johnson & Greenberg, 1987, p. 556).

EFT has been found to be effective with a variety of presenting problems, for example, trauma (MacIntosh & Johnson, 2008), depression (Dessaulles, Johnson, & Denton, 2003), and illness (Walker, Johnson, & Manion, 1996). Overall, it has been found that 70–75% of couples move from distress to recovery (Johnson, Hunsley, Greenberg, & Schindler, 1999). Furthermore, 86–90% experience significant improvement, with the gains sustained for months to years following EFT-based treatment. As such, EFT is an evidence-based treatment protocol (Dalglish et al., 2015; Denton, Johnson, & Burleson, 2009; Johnson, Burgess Moser, et al., 2013; Johnson, Hunsley, et al., 1999). Three process variables have shown significance across EFT studies: (a) the quality of the therapeutic alliance, particularly the task aspect of alliance; (b) the depth of emotional processing, particularly in Stage 2 of EFT; and (c) the couples' ability to move into interactions where they can articulate fears and needs (Bradley & Furrow, 2004; Johnson & Wittenborn, 2012). A key change event, labeled a "softening," has been found to predict treatment success (Furrow, Edwards, Choi, & Bradley, 2012).

The three stages of EFT are de-escalation, changing interactional positions, and consolidation (Johnson, 2004). *De-escalation* includes four steps that culminate with reframing the problem in terms of underlying emotion and attachment needs. *Changing interactional positions* includes three steps in which the therapist works with each partner to (a) promote the identification of disowned attachment emotions and needs, (b) promote the acceptance of their partner's experience and create new interaction responses, and (c) facilitate the expression of needs and wants and create emotional engagement through bonding events that redefine their attachment. Finally, *consolidation* focuses on creating new solutions to old relationship problems and consolidating the new positions each partner has in their new, more positive interaction cycle.

While it is possible for any couple, together or separated, to complete all three stages of EFT, Stage 1 work is more likely to be viable with couples who are separated or divorced. The willingness to engage in any kind of couples counseling will be influenced by a shared goal or understanding that they will remain connected for life as coparents. Johnson (2004) noted that "EFT works best for couples who still have some emotional investment in their relationship" (p. 201). While separated or divorced couples may actually be in the process of divesting emotionally from each other, the need to renegotiate and reinvest in a joint parenting relationship is highlighted by the research about the impact of divorce on

children. This highlights the importance of, and need for, a clear contract with the separated couple before starting counselling with them.

Establishing a therapeutic contract with couples who are separated or divorced can be one of the more difficult therapeutic tasks and possibly the most important. Couples who are separated often have multiple issues that will be identified during the assessment process. A therapeutic contract is a critical element in the formation of a therapeutic system in couples counselling (Friedlander, Escudero, & Heatherington; 2006; Sheehan & Friedlander, 2015). A contract is an “agreement to work on a specific problem ... with explicit goals, expectations for their fulfillment, and a description of the means by which the goals will be achieved” (Ungar, 2011, p. 209). For these couples, a contract must satisfy both members of the couple, the family, the counsellor, and the agency or organization if a counsellor is working for one. Establishing a clear contract is critical for all counselling work; when working with couples who are separated or divorced, this is further highlighted as a critical step that sets the foundation for and boundaries of the work with the couple. What follows is a description of a couple who separated, planned for divorce, and decided on couples counselling as a means to address their coparenting relationship.

CASE EXAMPLE

The following is a fictionalized case example based on actual clinical work with a number of couples who were divorced or separated. Rosalita and Carl had been together for 12 years and married for the last 10 years. They have an 8-year-old son and 6-year-old daughter. The previous year, Rosalita decided that she no longer wanted to be married to Carl after a series of life events prompted her to reflect further about her priorities. She had cared for her mother who died 2 years earlier, lost a job 3 years ago that she had thought she would have until retirement, and experienced a number of family transitions related to the children starting school. While Carl was supportive throughout these major life events, his demanding work limited his availability. Moreover, his sense of humour could be caustic at times, which Rosalita found particularly corrosive.

After settling into a new job, Rosalita announced that she wanted a divorce. Carl was understandably taken aback, surprised, and hurt. He felt that they had come through some challenging life events, and was looking forward to enjoying time with his family without the challenges of caregiving for a sick parent and the financial strain of having to rely on his salary only. In the 8 months since the announcement, Rosalita moved out and established her own household. They agreed to a 50-50 parenting schedule and had developed the weekly routines for their children moving from one household to the other. During this time, they realized that the same arguments and struggles they had in their marriage continually resurfaced when they discussed issues pertaining to the children or had to deal with events that were outside of the children’s weekly routine. Particularly troubling was that the arguments were becoming more heated than

previously. Both were seeing individual counsellors to deal with the loss of the marriage. Upon regularly hearing the struggles of coparenting, Carl's counsellor recommended that they seek couples counselling to explore the possibilities of developing their coparent relationship. The following represents Stage 1 work in EFT with this couple.

Rosalita and Carl arrived for the first appointment, 8 months after she announced her desire to separate, ready to discuss how they viewed the problem and how they felt the other was contributing to it. EFT is an experiential approach, and assessment is not separate from treatment; the counsellor is always learning about the clients and adapting the therapeutic approach. Seeing the way each viewed their current challenges as coparents was important to gather, track, reflect, and develop a good understanding of both perspectives. The first step in EFT is creating a therapeutic alliance and clarifying the conflict issues in the core attachment struggles. Tracking and reflecting these discussions is an important therapeutic skill for delineating those struggles.

In EFT, a counsellor reflects present emotion and positions in the couple's struggle. When skillfully done, clients feel understood and acknowledged by the counsellor. Reflection in EFT is not simply paraphrasing the client's words or actively listening; it "requires intense concentration from the therapist and an empathic absorption in the client's experience" (Johnson, 2004, p. 78). By tracking the client's experience and reflecting it, a counsellor becomes aware of how a client constructs his or her experience. A counsellor's skill at developing awareness of the client's experience facilitates the therapeutic alliance. At the same time, this reflection directs clients to their experience, provides opportunities for intrapersonal consideration, and slows down the interpersonal process in the room. "A good reflection is the first step in making a client's experience vivid, tangible, concrete, specific, and active..." (Johnson, 2004, p. 79). For Carl and Rosalita, as with many couples, this meant tracking and reflecting their two very different experiences. The following is a brief sample from the first session of how to establish a focus on tracking and reflecting:

Therapist: So, as I continue to get to know the two of you, I'm going to sort of reflect back some of what you say to make sure I am getting a sense of what it has been like for you in this relationship.

Rosalita: Oh ... OK.

Therapist: And I need you to help me if I say something that is not right or I use a word that does not fit your experience, then I need you to correct me. Can you do that? Would that be all right?

Carl: Sure, you'll do that for both of us? What it has been like for each of us?

Therapist: Yes, I know there may be at least two answers to every question I ask you both, and I need to know what it has been like for each of you in this relationship.

Carl: Mm-hmmm.

Rosalita: I would like that. I can do that.

Rosalita had become tired of bearing the bulk of the responsibility for the children and the household while they were married. She now viewed Carl's questions and suggestions about the children as an intrusion into her way of understanding and caring for them. Rosalita acknowledged that Carl is a very caring father and did not question his ability with or his love for their children. From her perspective, coparenting would be a lot easier if Carl simply did things her way. After all, she had done the bulk of the child care until they separated. Carl had made a number of changes to his work schedule since the separation to facilitate his parenting time. He was very committed to being a coparent and sharing the time with their children on a 50-50 basis. Carl had sometimes felt like an intruder in his own home while they were married, having to go along with routines, discipline, and decisions about activities and schools, while feeling he had little input. Carl was complimentary about Rosalita as a mother and knew how much she cared for their children. He felt like Rosalita was quite dismissive of him as a parent, and he was moving toward making their communication exclusively functional about issues such as drop-off times. Carl believed that limiting their dialogue to the time and location of transitions of the care of the children to each other would limit his exposure to Rosalita's criticism. Carl decided that if she did not care for his input about the children, he did not need to struggle with her to have his view incorporated, and he would simply view the situation as two separate households with two separate families.

During the first appointment in EFT, it is important not only to track and reflect each partner's experience, but also to validate their perspectives. Validation requires a counsellor to convey "to both partners that they are entitled to their experience and emotional responses" (Johnson, 2004, p. 79). This may include delineating the intent from the other's experience. For example, it was important to validate Rosalita's experience of having to figure things out on her own without focusing on her perception of Carl's abilities or interest as a father.

This proactive acceptance of each partner's experience is essential early in the work for building a therapeutic alliance with each partner. This kind of acceptance from a counsellor can be "an antidote to the constricted experiencing and presentation of the self, which result from self-criticism or from anticipated judgement of others" (Johnson, 2004, p. 79). One means of demonstrating validation is by tentatively offering an empathic reflection that incorporates both partners' perspectives; for example, saying to Rosalita and Carl:

Rosalita, there you were with two small children, an ailing mother, and no job and you feel all alone, like the only person you could count on was yourself? And Carl, for you, when you see Rosalita charging ahead, ignoring you, your questions, and your input, you feel like you do not matter as a father, like what you have to offer is not enough?

These are tentatively offered in a questioning manner and checked with each partner to ensure that they actually reflect their experience (e.g., "Do I have that correct?" "Does that fit for you?"). After we developed a tentative contract at the

end of the first session to focus on the coparenting relationship, the next steps were to conduct individual sessions with each of them.

Individual sessions with each partner provide opportunities to gather more information about each partner, build an alliance, discuss the issues without the other partner present (e.g., commitment level, affairs, previous attachment traumas that affect the present relationship), and assess for any contraindicators to EFT couples work, such as violence in the relationship. Finally, individual sessions also allow the counsellor to “refine his or her impression of the underlying feelings and attachment insecurities that influence each partner’s interactional position and to begin to articulate those insecurities with individual partners” (Johnson, 2004, p. 122). For Carl and Rosalita, the individual sessions were important for additional reasons as well.

A counsellor will generally gather more information about each partner’s experience in a relationship during an individual session. For former couples, exploring each partner’s experience of the relationship may be fraught with emotions about which they have not yet developed a sense of coherence, including sadness, anger, and—for some—happiness and relief. When there is a lack of coherence about emotional experience, it is imperative to explore those experiences in a way that develops empathy for the former partner (McRae, Dalgleish, Johnson, Burgess-Moser, & Killian, 2014). Counsellors working with separated or divorced couples also need to assess where they are in the process of separation or divorce, which is more easily assessed during an individual session. This may lead to a recommendation for individual counselling to support the development of some kind of coherence about their experience of the loss of the relationship.

If a couple’s counsellor recommends individual counselling, it is important to find counsellors who have a relational or systemic orientation and, in this case, are trained in attachment-based approaches such as EFT. The couple’s work can be compromised by counsellors working individually with clients if they are not also properly trained in working with relationships. Rosalita and Carl were each seeing counsellors with a systemic orientation, which contributed to their progress.

It is not necessarily common to have three counsellors involved with one couple, and financial limitations will not make this possible for some couples. It is also important during individual sessions with separated couples to clarify the boundaries and secure a commitment to the therapeutic contract. In this case, Rosalita was very clear that the marriage was over and she was seeking help with a coparenting relationship, while Carl still had some unresolved feelings about the marriage. A counsellor will clarify that the couples counselling is not about their couple relationship but how to be coparents with different households.

After each of their individual sessions, Rosalita and Carl returned for the fourth session together. The second step in Stage 1 of EFT is to identify the negative interaction cycle and further clarify the contract that includes a reframing of the problem as the self-reinforcing negative cycle. For Rosalita and Carl, this included the cycle’s impact on their coparenting. Reframing is used throughout EFT, both to externalize a problem (White & Epston, 1990) and to continuously situate a

partner's behaviour in the context of the other's response (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). At this point in the therapeutic work, a counsellor may begin to tentatively offer their understanding of the negative cycle, checking with each partner about how their perception of the cycle reflects his/her experience. It is not uncommon at this stage for counsellors newer to EFT to assume that once the cycle has been reviewed with a couple and agreed upon, each partner has an understanding of the cycle and their position in it. While possible, the more likely scenario is that a counsellor will need to dedicate a number of sessions to exploring emotions that underpin each partner's interactional positions in the negative cycle, which is Step 3 in the first stage of EFT. The following is an example from a session that explored their negative cycle:

Rosalita: I can parent fine on my own. I don't need to discuss with Carl how to parent our children, I was on my own in our marriage, why should it be any different now?

Carl: Not that what I say matters to you anyway!

Rosalita: The children do well with me!

Therapist: OK, OK, let's slow down here. Rosalita, help me out here: what is it like for you now that the two of you are separated, knowing that Carl wants to discuss the parenting of the children with you, while in the marriage he left you with that on your own ... it must be very hard for you?

Rosalita: It is very hard. It's very difficult ... You know (eyes tearing up) ... I want my children to have a good relationship with their father, but he needs to understand how much I have given to our family, how much I have sacrificed while he focused on his work.

Therapist: Right, so when you see him asking questions or making suggestions or ignoring yours, that gets real difficult for you. And what do you do then, when Carl starts asking questions? What do you do with that?

Rosalita: I get so frustrated! I just start telling him what to do and how I have managed with the children all these years.

Therapist: OK, and is that all right? Does that help, or does it just escalate the situation?

Rosalita: No, I think both our steam rises and we just have to get away from each other (small laugh).

Carl: Yeah, I don't think either of us feel good about that but we seem to get caught going back to that same argument ...

Continuing to track, reflect, and validate each partner's experience at this step in EFT, a counsellor will increase his or her use of evocative reflections and questions and begin to offer empathic conjectures. Evocative interventions are "designed to open up and expand each partner's emotional experience of the relationship" (Johnson, 2004, p. 137). Evocative reflections or questions have three characteristics. They are particular (i.e., specific moment in time, location, event, sensation); they promote subjective reflexivity; and they use sensory, connotative language (e.g., metaphors, imagery) (Rice, 1974). The purpose of evocative reflections and

questions is “to stimulate the client to get deeper and more accurately into [his or her] experience” (Rice, 1974, p. 309).

With couples who are separated, it is critical at this juncture that we do not reiterate past emotional experience to blame their partner or justify one’s own behaviour. The counsellor is constantly monitoring, tracking, and reflecting to ensure that, as emotional experience is processed, clients do not attack or withdraw to protect from the attachment injury that comes with exploring less coherent emotional experiences. For Carl, he felt that discussing coparenting with Rosalita was like “climbing up a muddy hill, and every time I get close to the top I slide down past where I started from. Like the harder I try the worse off I am!” Rosalita, on the other hand, resonated with the therapist when he suggested,

It’s like you are stranded on an island with the responsibility of ensuring your children survive, you have to make a number of crucial decisions and they need to be sorted quickly to ensure everyone’s well-being, and when you hear Carl’s questions and comments, it is taking you away from what matters most.

Carl and Rosalita had previously heard or seen the secondary or reactive behaviour and emotion that was part of their negative cycle. Rosalita would simply talk over Carl when he started to raise questions or offer suggestions about the children that were different than her ideas. From Carl’s perspective, she took control and “ran roughshod over” him. Rosalita felt the need to take control and manage a situation for the children’s benefit and hers. She did not want to deal with Carl’s sarcasm or anger that seemed to bubble as they discussed a matter related to the children. Validation of these secondary reactions by the counsellor is critical at this stage of the work, given that “a primary block to engagement with one’s emotional state is automatic self-critical cognitions about the unacceptable, inappropriate, and even dangerous nature of particular emotions” (Johnson, 2004, p. 136). Clients will only explore emotional experience if they feel their secondary or more reactive responses are genuinely reflected, validated, and understood in the context of their lives, including relationships, family of origin, and any events that have impacted their experience of the current relationship being explored.

An *empathic conjecture* is an EFT strategy used to encourage a partner to process his or her experience one step further. A counsellor can offer a formulation of a partner’s experience using conclusions drawn from his or her experience with a client, the client’s relational context, family of origin or sociopolitical factors that have affected the clients’ lives (Jordan, 2009) and incorporate the counsellor’s own perspective on the relationship distress. These are offered tentatively and are open to immediate corrective feedback from clients. In EFT, “these inferences are often used to crystallize partners’ attachment insecurities and fears and to relate such fears to specific elements of the partner’s behavior that act as triggers for such fears” (Johnson, 2004, p. 139). For couples renegotiating their relationship to coparenting, the need to trust and be trusted as a parent, to have an understanding that they are on the same team as parents, to experience the other as a valuable part of

raising their children, and to be experienced as valuable are the attachment needs that drive the therapeutic work.

Given that Carl and Rosalita had received some individual counselling about the loss of their marriage, they were able to discuss their underlying emotion and attachment fears at the counsellor's prompting. For Carl, it was about being good enough for Rosalita as a father, that she truly did value him as an important part of their children's lives. Rosalita, on the other hand, needed to know that she could count on him, that he was not going to abandon her as a parent or expect her to compensate if his work demands interfered with his ability to care for their children. At this point, the counsellor encouraged Carl and Rosalita to enact these positions with each other.

Enactments are counsellor-initiated interventions that stimulate and change interactions in the couple (Davis & Butler, 2004). In EFT, they are key change events and are more successful when focused on clients' experience of the relationship impasse rather than on problem-solving (Friedlander, Heatherington, Johnson, & Skowron, 1994). The counsellor facilitates the interaction by directing one member of the couple to talk to the other as the counsellor intervenes in the evolving, moment-to-moment processes. There are three types of enactments in EFT: (a) introductory and diagnostic, (b) heightening rarely occurring events, and (c) enacting present positions (Tilley & Palmer, 2013). In Stage 1 of EFT, a counsellor is more likely to use introductory and diagnostic enactments as well as enacting present positions. Rosalita was able to turn to Carl and talk about her fears of being left to deal with their children on her own. The counsellor helped Carl to process her fears and reflect back to her his understanding of this softer, more vulnerable aspect of their negative cycle. Carl, in turn, described to Rosalita his fear that he did not matter to her as a parent. She was able to reflect that fear and make sense of the anger that would bubble up in him during their discussions. After each enactment, the counsellor processed the exchange by reflecting their negative cycle, how each had been stuck in their positions, and how the enactment was an exception to that cycle. By continually situating their behaviours in the context of the cycle, a counsellor "stresses the legitimacy of each person's responses," which supports the client "further accessing and reprocessing emotion" (Johnson, 2004, p. 140). For couples who are separated or divorced, this may raise some unexpected emotion, as it did for Carl.

As Carl and Rosalita were able to turn and discuss some of their vulnerabilities as coparents and begin to see their challenge as a shared negative cycle, Carl began to experience new aspects of the loss of the marriage. He reflected further about his role in the dissolution of their marriage and wondered if these new ways of communicating were a possible platform for reconciliation. As the counsellor gently explored these developing feelings, sadness emerged from Carl about the loss of the relationship. Until that moment, Carl had only expressed, and Rosalita had only seen, his anger about the end of the marriage. As his eyes filled with tears and he described his sadness about the end of the marriage, Rosalita developed new hope about the potential for coparenting with Carl. She further recognized

his anger as part of their negative cycle, and Carl experienced relief at being able to process and understand his emotions and a sense of efficacy at being able to recognize his role in their negative cycle. The initial contracting with Carl and Rosalita was critical to reiterate that the focus was on their coparenting relationship and not about processing new hopes for the relationship. Of course, clients can jointly decide to change a contract with a counsellor.

The fourth and final step of Stage 1 work in EFT is reframing the problem in terms of contexts and the negative cycle. Reframing occurs throughout EFT, with the counsellor repeatedly reframing the problem in the context of the cycle. In Step 4 of EFT, reframing is also a specific step in the counselling work. At this point in EFT work, a counsellor summarizes the work done to date, including the negative interaction cycle, each partner's position in the cycle, and the emotions underlying their interactional positions (i.e., Steps 2 and 3). The counsellor explicitly reframes the problem as the positions in their negative interactions, the negative cycle, and the emotions that organize each person's response. The reframing "replaces the formulation of the problem that each partner first came in with" (Johnson, 2004, p. 140), and creates a common problem in which they each play a role.

Carl and Rosalita recognized the negative cycle and the roles that each played in it that were affecting their coparenting relationship. The counsellor was able to facilitate a series of enactments that set the foundation for a new, more positive cycle for the two of them to discuss coparenting. These enactments included both Carl and Rosalita discussing their fears and sadness that were underlying their more reactive emotions such as anger. By talking about his role as father, his need to participate in decisions about the children, and his fear that Rosalita did not recognize the significance of his parenting, Carl was able to develop some coherence about his fears and develop alternatives to becoming angry at Rosalita when he felt she was not taking him seriously. Rosalita, on the other hand, began to process some of the anger and loss associated with Carl while they were married. Moreover, she recognized when the compelling urge to cut him off or talk over him would arise, and she could use this as a cue to listen in a more empathic way to his concerns about the children. They were able to have different conversations about coparenting that matched their intent to share parenting on a 50-50 basis, to reduce the impact of the divorce on their children, and to recognize that they will be in each other's lives through their children for their entire lives.

CONCLUSION

With the use of Stage 1 of EFT, divorced or divorcing couples with children can create a new, positive coparenting relationship. Both counsellors and parents benefit if they recognize divorce as a process as opposed to a one-off event, understand the potential negative impact of parental conflict on children, and know that couples with children will be involved in each other's lives through their children long after a divorce.

The implications for counsellors include the need to pursue specialized couples counselling training where they can develop a clear understanding of relationship distress and how to conceptualize and work with relationship distress. For parents, this recognition invites them to view the process of developing a new coparenting relationship as one that may take some time. This could include developing a better understanding of what negatively impacted the marriage, appreciating each other's strengths as parents, and acknowledging the role each partner plays in their negative cycles. While some couples go on to develop a stronger friendship postdivorce or see the end of the relationship as an opportunity to learn from each other about how to be in a relationship (e.g., Paltrow, 2014), most divorcing or divorced couples seek to move on from the painful aspects of the end of their relationship, and may need assistance formulating a new relationship that is focused on their roles as parents.

Note

1. The term "couples counselling" will be used throughout this article. Couples counselling includes premarital counselling, psychoeducation programs (e.g., PREP), working with relationship distress, separation counselling, sex therapy, and other forms of work with couples who are at various stages of their relationships.

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