

**Emotionally Focused Therapy:  
A Roadmap To Working With  
Couples**



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The key to a relationship :  
**ARE** you there for me? Accessible,  
Responsive and Emotionally  
Engaged.....

Healthy relationships have all the same  
challenges; their success is in their  
ability to engage and repair

**Disconnection > Distress/Anxiety**

Infant's facial expression goes from relaxed  
curiosity to:

Fearful surprise ("Who are these two people  
you are leaving me with?")

- They turn & look, "Where are you?"
- Then cries, screams, "Someone, I know,  
please come get me!"

**HEALTHY CARETAKER RESPONSE**

**Approach physically & reach  
verbally:**

**Coo, use soft, sing-song tones, hold,  
pat, hug, sway, express concern**

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT

Infants internalize the attention/  
“love response”

Develop an internal working model  
of self as lovable, valued, interesting,  
delightful, important

OR NOT

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT

- View “the other” as loving, protective, interested, delighted, present - OR NOT
- Interact with surrogate attachment figures (friends, toys) in same way
- Infants begin to create their own “self story”

What Happens If  
NO Attention/Nurturing?

- I have no one to listen to my song and tell my stories to

OR

- The most important person they sang their songs and told their stories to hurt them or stopped listening.

**From *The Developing Mind***

Caretakers are **psychologically-able** to provide sensitive parenting

- Attunement
- Soothe distress
- Amplify positive experiences



Child feels caretaker is a safe haven.

**From *The Developing Mind***

- Repeated positive experiences become encoded in the brain as MENTAL MODELS or SCHEMATA OF ATTACHMENT
  - Implicitly in the early years
  - Explicitly as the child gets older
- **Positive mental models of self and others are carried into other relationships as the child matures**

“When we can let go of what other people think and **own** our story, we gain access to our worthiness – the feeling that we are good enough as we are.

IT IS OUR SENSE OF WORTHINESS that critically important piece that gives us access to love and belonging--- lives inside our story.”~

*Brene Brown*

**Neuroscience**

- Brain wires to adapt to environment
- Goals:
  - Survive
  - Relieve Pain
  - Reduce Anxiety
  - Feel Comforted with Connection
- Once wired the brain seeks similarity
- Influences neuronal-systems of perception, sensation, cognition, behavior



**NEUROBIOLOGY OF ATTACHMENT**

- Childhood experiences with caretakers leads the developing brain to organize events, thoughts & feelings
  - pre-frontal cortex in particular
- Forms basis intrapersonal and interpersonal functioning

### Feeling Safe is a Chemical Reaction:

- Reduces stress hormones:  
epinephrine, norepinephrine, cortisol
- Increases dopamine > enhances attention & pleasure
- Increases serotonin > reduces fear & worry
- Increases oxytocin > trusting of others

### CHRONIC ELEVATED LEVELS OF CORTISOL

- Suppress the Immune System
- Increase Blood Pressure and Sugar
- Decrease Libido
- Contribute to Obesity

### LEADS TO DIMINISHED OR LOST:

- Ability to learn language/ speak
- Ability to understand feelings or having words to describe them
- Connection between how we feel and our sensory experience
- Empathy
- Impulse Control
- Regulation of mood
- Short term memory
- Enjoyment

### ATTACHMENT THEORY Bowlby & Ainsworth

“All of us, from cradle to grave, are happiest when life is organized as a series of excursions, long or short, from the secure base provided by our attachment figure(s).”

John Bowlby 1988

## Secure Attachment

- Expresses full range of emotions
- Ability to Self-soothe
- Ability to share feelings
- Ok with others' feelings
- Able to show Empathy
- Reach & Receive

## Avoidant Attachment

- Restricted emotions & empathy
- Comfort self with things
- Addictions common
- Doesn't share feelings
- Difficulty with commitment
- Suppression of needs
- Close is Uncomfortable

## ANXIOUS/AMBIVALANT ATTACHMENT

- Desires closeness, but never enough
- "Merges" with other
- Fear of Abandonment
- Clings and criticizes
- Cautious about depending on others
- Difficulty feeling comforted
- Pursuing to almost aggression to obtain a response

## DISORGANIZED/FEARFUL

- Desires closeness, but fears so avoids
- Merge/Distance Dance
- Terrified of abandonment
- Sabotages closeness
- Attracted to people who victimize
- No real sharing ability
- Overwhelmed by others feelings
- Dissociates when in face of strong emotion

### The challenge with a couple in distress

- No SAFE emotional connection (safe harbor)
- Escalation > danger > protection > disconnect
- Patterns of behavior become rigid “normal”
- Insecure attachment > negative cycles > insecure attachment

### Emotionally Focused Therapy

- Developed by Dr. Sue Johnson & Dr. Les Greenberg in the 1980's
- CREATES SAFE & SECURE BONDS



### EFT Research “Hold My Hand”

Examined the effectiveness for modifying the social regulation of Neural Threat Response utilizing fMRI

- EFT altered the brain's representation of threat cues in the presence of a romantic partner
- EFT increases threat-related brain activity in regions associated with self-regulation during the no-handholding condition

Johnson, S.M., Burgess Moser, M., Beckes, L., Smith, A., Dalgleish, T., Halchuk, R., Hasselmo, K., Greenman, P.S., Merali, Z. & Coan, J.A. (2013). Soothing the threatened brain: Leveraging contact comfort with Emotionally Focused Therapy. PLOS ONE, 8(11): e79314.

### EFT Research

- 70 - 73% rate of improvement
- Two-year follow-up on relationship distress, depression- 60% report a maintenance of gains

Check website for studies - [www.iceeft.com](http://www.iceeft.com)

## Emotionally Focused Therapy

“A CONVERSATION BETWEEN CARL ROGERS,  
SALVADOR MINUCHIN AND JOHN BOWLBY”

Sue Johnson

- Focuses on present experience
  - **CHANGE HAPPENS IN THE PRESENT**
- Connect the emotional experience > express emotions
- **Systemic** - looks at the whole relationship
- Negative patterns/cycles > Positive bonding patterns
- Shift emotional signals - Change the music

## What Does EFT Offer

### Exploration

- **Within** – How each individual perceives and constructs his/her emotional experience in relationship to others
- **Between** – How each individual engages with others
- **Attachment Injuries**>>> Blocks

## *ATTACHMENT INJURY*

- A betrayal of trust / abandonment at crucial moment of need.
- A form of relationship trauma – defines relationship as insecure.
- An impasse in repair process – blocks trust.

Attachment significance is key – not content.

Indelible imprint – only way out is through

## *RESOLUTION OF ATTACHMENT INJURIES*

- Articulate injury and impact. “NEVER AGAIN!”
  - The other acknowledges hurt partner’s pain and elaborates on the evolution of the event.
  - The hurt partner integrates narrative and emotion. He/She accesses attachment fears and longings.
  - The other owns responsibility – expresses regret – while staying attuned / engaged. (*I feel your hurt – your pain impacts me*)
  - The hurt partner asks for comfort / reassurance.
  - The other responds – antidote bonding event.
  - Relationship is redefined as potential safe haven.
  - New narrative is constructed.
- Only true fix is your partner looking you in the eye and sharing pain.

### Benefits of EFT

- Validation/ “Normalize” experiences, feelings and behaviors
- Create New Bonding Responses
  - Enactments
  - Going Deeper
- Healthy Engagement and Disengagement

### EFT, ATTACHMENT & EMOTIONS

- Identify and Express **ATTACHMENT** Needs
- Create Secure ATTACHMENT Base
- **CORRECTLY IDENTIFY EMOTIONS**
- Validate/Normalize **the EMOTION**

### Types of Emotion

Primary

Mostly Biologically Adaptive

Can be Maladaptive ie laughing at pain

Secondary

Reactions to Primary Emotions

Aversive & Unwanted

Interfere with Effective Communication

ie... shame and anger are usually reactions to pain

\*Instrumental emotions are attempts to manipulate the environment. Crying in order avoid expected punishment is an example of an instrumental emotion.

### Primary

Primary emotions are original/core/basic emotions “in the moment ”experienced in response to change in environment:

Fear

Sadness

Anger

Happiness/Joy

Disgust/Shame

Hurt/Pain



## Secondary

Secondary (or reactive emotions) occur in response to other emotions/thoughts

- resentment/frustration/anger
- anxiety/jealousy/panic
  - helpless withdrawal
  - hopeless despair
  - embarrassment

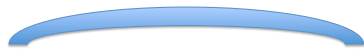
Understandable- often not adaptive

## SECONDARY EMOTIONS AND THE CYCLE

- In trying to connect, distressed couples get caught in negative cycles
- Partners express secondary emotions rather than primary emotions

## Looking Underneath

Secondary Emotional Experience  
Reactive, Defensive, Protective Emotion



Underlying Experience  
Primary Emotion Attachment Needs and Concerns

## Predictors of Success with EFT

- Alliance
- Distress at beginning of treatment only predicted 4% of variance in outcome.
- Deeper emotional experiencing = greater satisfaction with therapy
- Best predictor – female’s faith that the partner “cared”

### Contraindications with EFT

- Domestic Violence
- Substance Addictions
- Ongoing Affairs

### GOALS OF EFT

- 1 • Access, expand and re-organize key emotional responses
- 2 • Create a shift in partner's interactional positions
- 3 • Foster the creation of a secure bond through creation of new interactional events

### Create the Safe Space for EMPATHY & VULNERABILITY

- Vulnerability is uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure
- “Open to attack” or “weakness” is too limiting
- More than just the dark emotions like fear, shame, grief, sadness and disappointment
- Core of all emotions and feelings

BRENE BROWN

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>

### PROCESS CONSULTANTS

EFT therapists PROCESS EVERYTHING!!!

- Resistance
  - Therapist is not in same space as client
- Acceptance

## Skills in Creating Alliance

- Acceptance
- Genuineness
- Reflection
- Validation
- Reframing
- Catching the bullet

## Therapist Know Thyself! Attachment Styles of Therapist

### **Secure**

- Self-regulate, re-ground
- Flexibility
- Duration, frequency & intensity of tendencies less

### **Avoidant/Dismissive**

- Exit process into content
- Exit partner - go to other
- Can't LEAN IN/ Engage
- Limited words
- Need to calm & quiet client
- Brain-freeze

### **Anxious/Pre-occupied**

Talks faster, non-productive asking irrelevant questions

Persuades clients into feelings or experiences

Gives Solutions- "fix it"

Justifications & Explanations

### **Disorganized/Fearful-Avoidant**

Dazed, confused, apprehensive

A little of both! - anxious and avoidant tendencies

## Basic Moves of EFT

**Reflect** - Within and Between  
Interaction/Dance; Steps/Pattern

**Deepen & Distill** - Utilize attachment frame  
Describe with emotional components

**Shape Enactments** - clear, simple messages

**Processes Everything** - Explore; can you help me understand

**Connect it/ Make Sense of it**-Integrates - Validates  
Reflects the Process

## Initial Session Meet with Couple Together

- Relationship history ie... dating, children
- Individual Attachment history – FOO
  - Comforting; Communication; Holidays; Discipline
- Assess for trauma, violence &/or substance abuse
- Sexual relationship history
- History of attachment injuries in relationship ie... Affairs (past or present)

*Observe Interaction & Body Language(enactment)*

## Look for The Demon Dialogues

(Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love. Dr. Sue Johnson, 2008, Little, Brown & Co., New York.)

### FIND THE BAD GUY

#### Mutual Blame & Attacks

- Each pre-empting the next blow >
- Reactions become more restricted >
- Keeps partners at arms length

#### FREEZE & FLEE

- Withdraw-Withdraw- partners shut down
- Escape - hurt and despair
- Dangerous Pattern

## PROTEST POLKA

### Protesting the Loss of Connection

- The Protester/Pursuer
  - “Demands or Criticizes” to make his/her point (hear me)
- The Defender/Withdrawer - Shuts Down (protection)

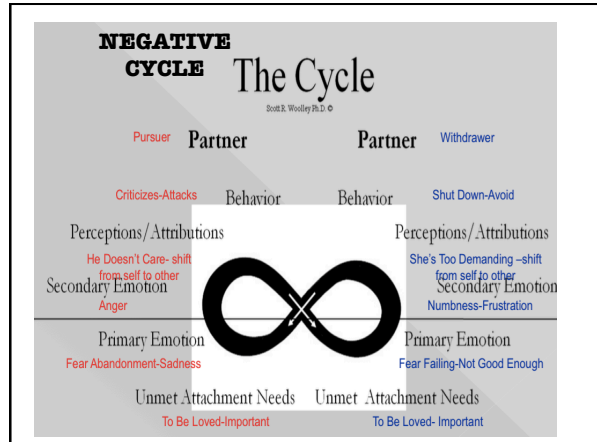
#### THE DANCE

Withdrawer - overwhelmed > shut down  
 Pursuer - devastated>> Escalation >>  
 Protest Polka >> Hopeless & Give Up

## Identifying & Delineating Negative Interactive Cycle

- **Basic Negative Cycles & Interactive POSITIONS**
  - Pursue/Withdraw
  - Withdraw/Withdraw
  - Reactive pursue/Withdraw
  - Burned out Pursuer/ Withdraw

POSITIONS IN THE CYCLE	
Withdrawers	Pursuers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rejected</li> <li>• Inadequate</li> <li>• Afraid of failure</li> <li>• Overwhelmed</li> <li>• Numb - frozen</li> <li>• Afraid - scared</li> <li>• Not wanted or desired</li> <li>• Judged, criticized</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hurt</li> <li>• Alone</li> <li>• Not wanted</li> <li>• Invisible</li> <li>• Isolated/ disconnected</li> <li>• Not important</li> <li>• Abandoned</li> <li>• Desperate</li> </ul>



**What We Want/Need Our Partner to Hear**

“Notice me”  
 “Be with me”  
 “I need you”  
 “I am in pain”  
 “I am afraid you won’t love me”  
 “I am afraid I am not good enough”  
 “I’m afraid you will leave me”

**What They Hear in the Cycle**

- “You are incompetent”
- “You always get it wrong”
- “You are too much to handle”
- “You are stupid”
- “You are not worth my time”

### Therapist Working with the Cycle

- Validate instead of rush past secondary  
“It’s understandable you are angry.”
- Explore *action tendency*  
“ You throw your hands up and leave.”
- Give permission for their survival  
“It Makes Sense”
- Give Voice to Primary Emotions  
“So what you really need is...”  
“What you are longing for is ....”

### Working with the Cycle

- Assess ability to risk going to their partner  
> ENACTMENT
- Catch the Bullet
- Process the Resistance > Slice it thinner  
“So it’s very difficult for you to turn...  
Maybe you could just let your partner  
know...”
- Validate “Stuck Place”
  - Go Back Up

### WITDHRAWERES Pathway to Safety

1. Get Pursuer to Back off and  
reduce the negative ***message***.  
Blame them for being too much
2. Get it right so I don’t get negative  
message

### HELP WITHDRAWER UNDERSTAND

- Pursuers ESCALATION is often  
triggered by feelings of helplessness,  
disconnection & need for comfort
- Not withdrawer failing
- Unmet needs often different- **not always  
fear failure, often it is helplessness.**

## WITHDRAWERS

- Avoid perceived “negatives” as means to safety
- Unaware of the benefits of receiving comfort in their vulnerability

**Key = understanding possibility of being loved without performance**

## Key To Withdrawer Re-engagement is:

- Understanding the why & purpose
- Confront Avoidance in Self
  - *shift from other focus to self focus*
- Withdrawer verbalizes his/her needs
  - Assert himself, *not to placate the pursuer*
- *Acknowledge the risk*

## What Does Withdrawing Do for the Withdrawer?

- PROTECTION
- Relieves the pressure/pain
- Ensures they can't make matters worse
- Keeps the bomb from exploding

## What Motivates Withdrawing?

FEAR:  
 Failing  
 Never Good Enough  
 Can't fix it  
 Can't make partner happy  
 Rejection  
 Judged

### WORKING WITH THE WITHDRAWER

Create Safety  
 Pursuer Softens & Withdrawer Re-engages

Step 5 > Feeling secure > Ability to Explore  
 √

Step 6 > Willingness to Risk > Partner Receives  
 √

Step 7  
 New Bonding Event

### What Does Pursuing Do For the Pursuer?

- PROTECTION
- Keep the connection alive
  - Fighting is better than silence
  - Abandonment is unbearable
- Possibility they might be heard
- Gives sense of control & prevents something worse from happening

### What Motivates Pursuing?

Fear of:  
 Abandonment  
 Not lovable  
 Too much!  
 Rejection  
 Not Important

### Pursuers are Typically Seen As:

More Reactive  
 More Assertive with attempts to solve conflicts  
 More Critical  
 More Expressive  
 More Afraid of Being Alone  
 More in Need of Reassurance  
 More Fearful of Being Vulnerable



## Pursuer Softening

Prerequisites:  
De-escalation of negative cycle  
Withdrawer re-engagement

## Softening (cont'd):

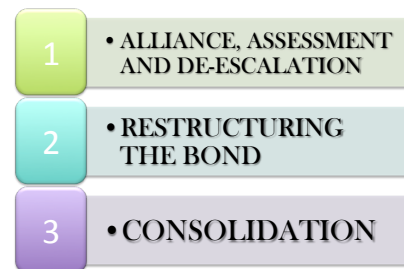
- Pursuer expands emotional experience
  - Access longing for contact
    - Acknowledge accompanying fears and sometimes shame
- Engaged withdrawer sees him/her differently
  - Afraid vs. dangerous
    - Vulnerability pulls partner toward the softened pursuer

## Pursuer Softening

Previously hostile, critical partner is able to access “softer emotions” & risks reaching out to his/her partner who is now accessible, responsive & engaged

- From this vulnerable state, partner asks for attachment needs to be met

## STAGES OF EFT



**STAGE 1  
EFT INTERVENTIONS**

**VALIDATION  
EMPATHETIC REFLECTION  
TRACKING, REFLECTING & REPLAYING  
INTERACTIONS  
REFRAMING CONTEXT OF THE CYCLE &  
ATTACHMENT PROCESS**

**TOOLBOX BASICS**

**RISSC**

Repeat  
Images  
Slow Pace  
Simple Words  
Soft Voice  
Client's Words

**VALIDATION**

- Legitimizes responses
- Supports exploration into their experience and their interactions
- De-escalates through acknowledgement

Validation Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AksObco7IQQ>

**EMPATHETIC REFLECTION**

- Validation that creates alliance & safety
- Focuses a session with repetition
- Slows processing & encourages engagement
- Better organizes & creates coherence

### Tracking, Reflecting & Replaying Interactions

- Slows down and clarifies steps in the interactional dance
- Replays and clarifies key interactional processes

"So what just happened? It seemed like you turned from your anger for a moment. Is that right? But Sue, you were paying attention to the anger and stayed behind your wall. Is that what happened?"

### Reframing Context of the Cycle & Attachment Processes

- Shifts the meaning of specific responses
- Clarifies their attachment significance
- Fosters more positive perceptions of the partner

"You shut down because you feel like you're about to lose her. Am I getting that right?"  
 "You freeze because she matters so much to you, not because you don't care."

### Stage 1 ALLIANCE, ASSESSMENT AND DE- ESCALATION

- Step 1: Create Alliance & Delineate Issues
  - Utilize Attachment Lens
- Step 2: Identify & Track the Negative Cycle
- Step 3: Access Underlying
- Step 4: Reframe negative cycle of interaction, underlying emotions, and attachment needs

*Cycle framed as enemy & source of the partners' emotional deprivation & distress*

### Important Aspects of Stage 1

- Hold Both Equally
- Validation & Normalizing > Understanding > Connection
- Therapist = Bridge
- Identify, Repeat/Restate Cycle
- The cycle is the "Body Snatcher"- It takes over!  
*"Teaming Up Against the Cycle"*

### Important Aspects of Stage 1

- Stage 1 is:
  - Therapists talks more
  - De-escalation occurs
    - Tunnel-vision turns into a meta-perspective
  - ❖ Reactivity not only prevents empathizing with your partner but also stops understanding yourself-drowning.

### How to know when you've reached de-escalation

- Less reactivity and more safety
- Access longings for connection
- Conflicts are calmer
- When angry & mistrusting it is less hostile
- Each partner's experience of self and other is less constricted
- Basic organization of the relationship is unchanged

### STAGE 2 – AFTER DE-ESCALATION

#### Each partner:

- Can identify position s/he takes in relationship when feeling threatened
- Can access inner emotional experience and can own their positions and underlying emotions
  - Mark owns paralysis/fear instead of going numb
  - Express feelings of desperation, sadness, need for connection instead of automatic reaction
- Coherent story of their cycle as enemy
- Identify the cycle in real time and interrupt it

### Important Aspects of Stage 2

- Enactments- Conditioning to turning/receiving
  - Redefines their relationship as safe
  - Creates bonding events
- Resistance is processed & validated
  - Slice it thinner
  - Catch the bullets

**STAGE 2  
RESTRUCTURING THE BOND  
“INTRA-PSYCHIC”**

Step 5:  
Identify Disowned Emotions, Needs, & Aspects of Self  
Integrating into Relationship Interactions

Step 6:  
Promote Acceptance of Partner’s Experience and New Responses

Step 7:  
Reach and Receive  
Expression of Needs & Creation of Engagement  
Create Bonding Events  
Redefine Attachment

**STAGE 2  
EFT INTERVENTIONS**

**HEIGHTENING  
EVOCATIVE RESPONDING  
REFLECTING THE EMOTIONAL  
EXPERIENCE  
EMPATHETIC CONJECTURE &  
INTERPRETATION  
RESRUCTURE & SHAPE  
INTERACTIONS - ENACTMENTS**

**HEIGHTENING**

- Highlights and intensifies key emotions, experiences and new formulations of experience that help re-organize the interaction.
- Expand and intensify emotional experience using repetition, images, metaphors, focusing, or enactments.

"It seems like this is so hard for you, like jumping off a cliff, so scary! "

"Can you turn to him and tell him, 'It's too hard to ask. It's too hard to ask you to take my hand.'"

**EVOCATIVE RESPONDING**

- Calls up emotion through open questions about stimuli, bodily responses, desires, meanings, or action tendencies.
- Expands elements of experience to help reorganize the experience; accesses unclear or marginalized elements of experience and encourages exploration and engagement.

"What's happening right now, as you say that?" "What's that like for you it be in this place? "

"Your face just seemed to change - can you tell me what is happening for you right now?"

### REFLECTING THE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE

- Builds & maintains the alliance
- Clarifies emotional responses underlying interactional positions

"So this gets so painful, it hurts so deeply that you just close up. Am I getting it right?"

### EMPATHETIC CONJECTURE & INTERPRETATION (YOUR THEORY OF WHAT'S HAPPENING)

- Promotes a more intense awareness of emotional experience, meanings, or action tendencies.

"I might be wrong, but maybe you don't believe it's possible that anyone could see this part of you and still accept you?"

"I'm feeling that underneath your frustration you may feel sad. Am I getting that right, that you feel sad?"

### Restructure and Shape Interactions - ENACTMENTS

- Clarifies and expands negative interaction patterns, creates new kinds of dialogue, new interactional processes and bonding events; leads to positive cycles of accessibility and responsiveness.

"What would it be like to tell him, 'I will not be dismissed again.'"

"Could you tell him about that shame?"

"Can you ask her right now for what you need?"

### "Slicing it Thinner"

(a reframing intervention)

- Make the risky enactment smaller- instead "I can't share my fear", how about "I want to but don't know how". Breaking into parts that want to (longing) and fears is very helpful.
- Option to use partner to make block/fear smaller
- Option to use self-as-therapist to make block smaller
- Option to do enactment through therapist
- Option to allow them to exit and go up

### “Catching the Bullet”

(a reframing intervention)

- We catch bullets all the time; this more specific intervention comes during enactment
- Different types of bullets
- How they land is what’s crucial
- Learn how to lean into them instead of trying to talk them out of mistrust/block , while simultaneously still safely holding the partner

### STAGE THREE: CONSOLIDATION

- Step 8: Facilitate the emergence of new solutions to old relationship problems.
- Step 9: Consolidate new positions and new cycles of attachment behaviors

***Consolidate new cycles of trust, connection and safety, and apply them to old problems that may still be relevant***

### Important Aspects of Stage 3

- Replacement of negative old cycle
- Demonstrate ability to repair
- Securely attachments don’t focus on content
- Meta- perspective (insight) and setting the stage to risk and create closer connections (experiential).

### For More Information, Presentations & Workshops:

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CEU Workshops for Therapists  
Hold Me Tight Workshops for Couples

RESOURCES

[WWW.ICEEFT.COM](http://WWW.ICEEFT.COM)