



## Couples Therapy Takes a Giant Step Forward

A Review of

Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy: The Dynamics of Emotion, Love, and Power  
by Leslie S. Greenberg and Rhonda N. Goldman

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Reviewed by

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Stated simply, *Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy: The Dynamics of Emotion, Love, and Power* is an outstanding book. Greenberg and Goldman have made a major contribution to the fields of couples therapy, family therapy, and the overall field of psychotherapeutic intervention. This book is very well written and quite readable. We will be integrating and digesting the material in this book for some time to come. Reader beware: There are many strengths that we identify in this text and few, if any, weaknesses.

Emotionally focused therapy for couples (EFT-C) has been widely adopted by couples therapists and many family therapists over the past two decades. EFT-C has also been extensively researched and is considered one of the leading evidence-based couples therapy models (Gottman, 1999; Gurman & Jacobson, 2002; Johnson, 2002b). For those actively involved in the research and practice of couples therapy, this book offers a significant conceptual shift as well as several significant additions and modifications to the EFT-C model.

For the first author of this review, J. Douglas Pettinelli, a couples and family therapist and family psychologist who has been following the creation and development of EFT-C since the late 1980s, several things were particularly striking when first picking up this book. First, Susan Johnson is not an author; second, Les Greenberg is the first author. Since the publication of their first book on emotionally focused couples therapy (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988), Susan Johnson has been identified with this widely adopted, evidence-based approach to couples therapy (Johnson, 1996, 2002a).

In the preface to this book, Greenberg offers a lengthy description of his activities and involvement in emotionally focused therapy. He acknowledges that after the initial collaborative effort with Susan Johnson in the first book (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988), he turned to his interest in emotionally focused therapy with individuals with the help of an NIMH grant to study experiential change processes in the individual therapy of depression (Goldman, Greenberg, & Angus, 2006; Greenberg, Rice, & Elliot, 1993; Greenberg & Watson, 1998). Also at that time, he and Susan Johnson agreed that she would in turn continue to promote and develop the couples approach. Clearly, Susan Johnson has taken that model to a position of great prominence in the fields of couples therapy and of marriage and family therapy as a whole (Johnson, 1996, 2002a).

Well, this new book clearly declares that Leslie Greenberg is back as a central figure in the development of EFT-C. Greenberg and Goldman describe this book as a product, in part, of his efforts after his return to the study and development of EFT-C. They describe Greenberg as refocusing on couples therapy research after receiving a grant from the Templeton Foundation's Campaign for Forgiveness Research to study forgiveness in

individual and couples therapy in 2002. Goldman became involved first as a graduate student working under Greenberg and then became increasingly involved in research on the EFT-C model.

A third, but easily missed, aspect of this book is that *emotionally* focused has been replaced with *emotion* focused. The authors make particular note of this change in the preface, stating that it is a consequence of the growing recognition of approaches to therapy falling under the general category of emotion-focused approaches. The authors further acknowledge that this change is a move to a more "American" phrasing, with the original term, *emotionally focused*, being more of an "English" term chosen by Greenberg and Johnson, who both have English backgrounds.

We see this name change as a concerted effort on the part of these authors to further punctuate the establishment of emotion as a primary focus in the field of psychotherapy. They seem to be stating to the field that they see a focus on emotion as a central, distinguishing characteristic of effective couples therapy and psychotherapy in general. They are clearly arguing that emotion has now arrived in our theory and practice as a central, if not *the* central, factor in effective psychotherapy and change. This is certainly the argument one encounters in Greenberg's excellent work on his process model for individual psychotherapy (Greenberg, 2002).

For the second author of this review, Michelle Engblom, a PhD student in the field of marriage and family therapy, this book turned her view of EFT upside down. The concepts are fresh, are based in extensive research, and are an incredible addition to the field and the understanding of EFT. There are many similarities with other books that provide a good, solid review of EFT, but there are many new additions as well. We highlight the most significant of both.

In both the preface and opening chapter, Greenberg and Goldman offer an in-depth review of the history of the development of the emotionally focused perspective. These two sections alone are justification for reading this book. For the knowledgeable reader, it is an excellent review, filled with often-overlooked facts and details about how this approach developed. For someone unfamiliar with this therapy model, it offers an excellent introduction to the approach and the developmental history of EFT. In particular, it is very interesting to learn about Greenberg's and Goldman's views and how this approach has developed. Their discussion would pique the interest of any historian of psychology and psychotherapy.

A fourth noteworthy aspect of this book is that it offers several significant additions to the existing EFT-C model. First, they provide a change from the now standard 3-stage, 9-step approach to couples treatment to an expanded 5-stage, 14-step process. Second, they are expanding the emphasis on the centrality of emotional processes by adding chapters on how to manage and intervene in couples work when specific emotions are predominant. The book contains chapters on anger, sadness, fear, and shame, as well as on positive emotional states.

Additionally, the authors introduce the view that affect regulation is the core motive that organizes attachment, identity, and attraction. As mentioned before, Leslie Greenberg has taken the original nine-step model and integrated new research on affect, in particular neuroscience research on emotion, mindfulness, and affective attunement (Siegel, 1999). He goes on to suggest that marriage itself can assist couples in regulating their affect. This information not only connects emotional regulation to the marriage and family therapy field and emotion-focused therapy but also places emotion and emotional regulation as central organizers in negative interaction cycles. This deepens and expands the initial effort by Greenberg and Johnson (1988) to integrate systems thinking with process-oriented, emotionally focused therapy models.

Further, they state that couples conflict is the result of a breakdown in both soothing one's partner and self-soothing. While self-soothing is a focus in the existing nine-step EFT-C therapy model, the authors place much greater emphasis in their fourth stage on the importance of self-soothing and focusing on one's self to

regulate emotional responses. Self-soothing is added as an essential approach to interrupting and shifting the negative interactional cycle that exists in the marriage and allowing the other person to begin experiencing the relationship in new ways. The authors stress the importance of self-regulation and self-soothing in relationships, observing that if the individuals are better able to regulate their own distress, they are less likely to attack or withdraw and can turn toward one another rather than away (Gottman, 1994). This focus is on both the self and on the system.

This emphasis on intervening to strengthen each individual's capacity to regulate and self-soothe introduces a much greater emphasis on the need to focus on each individual's self within the context of a couples therapy process. For many systems-oriented couples therapists, this stands as a departure from a preferred, primary emphasis on interactional processes. In fact, some may argue that this new adaptation of EFT-C encourages too much focus on the individual, attempting to promote individual therapy in a couples therapy context.

Our reading of this book is that Greenberg and Goldman are making just such a proposal. One could argue that the authors are making this too much about the individual and that this focus is a weakness. It will be interesting to follow future research on this new version of EFT-C to see if it will reveal the same levels of efficacy as previously identified with this model.

Until this book, EFT-C has adopted attachment theory as a primary theoretical foundation. Greenberg and Goldman propose a modification in the centrality of attachment in the EFT-C model. They state:

So in our view, it is emotional reactivity and regulation, not internal working models and attachment styles, that generate people's attachment-related perceptions, motivations, and behaviors. Thus, we focus on how anger, sadness, fear, shame, compassion and love, as well as other emotions, are activated and regulated and how to work with these processes in therapy. (p. 83)

This statement gives a preview of the main thesis of their therapeutic approach. This thesis represents a significant shift in the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of EFT-C.

There are so many strengths in this book, coupled with new and interesting innovations to the model, that weaknesses are not really apparent. One criticism might be that there is insufficient illustration of the interventions with case material. However, we would make the argument that this book now requires a follow-up therapist manual, much like that published recently by Susan Johnson (Johnson et al., 2005).

In sum, this book introduces a very significant revision and, we think, advance in the emotion-focused couples therapy approach. Even for those who are not therapists, this is a book worthy of one's time and attention. This book should appeal to those interested in emotion theory, affect regulation, and the areas of mindfulness and self-soothing. Additionally, the authors discuss the application of neuroscience research to emotional functioning, offering interesting applications of recent research findings.

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