

## How to Save Your Relationship

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*Summary: Guidelines for reconnecting and bringing relationships back to life.*

It was Mike Martin's affair that finally led him and his wife, Katie, to my office for couples counseling. But the betrayal was a symptom of a deeper problem in their 19-year marriage. "He felt like he wasn't getting his emotional needs met at home," says Katie, 45, a teacher in Richmond, Virginia. "Maybe that's because he was never here! He was a workaholic and didn't come home until midnight every night--for years." When Katie told Mike she wanted to spend more time together, he would pull out his calendar and say, "How's lunch next Thursday?" Katie recalls. "I felt neglected and over time I withdrew emotionally. Between his not being there in person and my not being there in spirit, we just stopped being able to get close."

The Martins were perfect candidates for EFT, an approach to marital counseling that seeks to re-create a sense of connection between partners. Unlike the traditional cognitive-behavioral approach, which focuses on teaching communication skills, EFT hinges on getting partners to recognize that they're both emotionally dependent on the other for love, comfort, support and protection, much like a child depends on a parent. In my sessions with couples, we get to the heart of the matter: the need for emotional security. Because without that security, asking troubled couples to trust and confide in each other is like asking people standing at the edge of a cliff and staring down a 2,000-foot drop to use their skills of listening and empathy--they can't, because they're too busy feeling afraid.

While a doctoral student at York University in Toronto, I began working with British psychologist Les Greenberg, Ph.D., in designing EFT based on attachment theory, which was developed 50 years ago by psychiatrist John Bowlby. Through his observations, Bowlby concluded that everyone has an innate yearning for trust and security, or attachment. Children need to feel attached to a parent; adults need to feel attached to another adult, usually a romantic partner. And when those we're attached to can't respond to our needs--maybe one partner is emotionally unavailable, say--we become anxious and fearful or numb and distant, which sets up dangerous patterns of interaction.

The Martins' situation is a case in point. Their toxic pattern, one of the most common, involves a wife who criticizes and becomes contemptuous toward her husband, while he distances himself. "I would tell Mike, 'I need you to be around more,' and I meant, 'I miss you,'" Katie explains. "But because of the irritation in my voice, he would hear, 'I am disappointed in you.'"

Patterns like this, which may eventually superimpose themselves onto every element of

the relationship, often create a slippery slope to divorce. Recent research by relationship guru John Gottman, Ph.D., confirms that it's often emotional distance--not conflict--that determines whether a relationship will flourish or begin to disintegrate. After all, every couple fights, but as long as partners can connect emotionally, their relationship should remain healthy. This same notion was also recently supported by Sandra Murray, Ph.D., at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York. Murray's study, published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, found that partners who feel well-regarded by their mates better handle the occasional hurts that occur in their relationships. So rather than pulling away or lashing out in defense, a confident partner instead draws the offending mate closer to protect the relationship's solidity.

The goal of EFT, therefore, is to help partners feel securely connected by fostering feelings of safety, accessibility and responsiveness. Once in this safe haven, partners are more capable of handling difficult feelings. They more easily process information, deal with ambiguity and see the other's perspective. They also send clearer messages and are better at collaborative problem solving. In truth, most distressed couples already have good communication skills--they get along very nicely with other loved ones and co-workers--they just can't apply those skills in their relationship. But if they have a solid emotional connection, if they feel loved, they'll naturally use the skills they already possess.

Although it's easy for some to dismiss the idea of emotional dependence as antiquated--particularly for women in this post-feminist era--there's no arguing with EFT's success rates. Between 70 and 75 percent of couples report being happy with each other again after undergoing EFT, compared with only 35 percent among those who try cognitive-behavioral counseling. The number of people who experience "significant improvement" is above 90 percent. The dropout rate? Negligible.

So how does EFT go about rebuilding intimacy? It's a nine-step treatment that can take anywhere from eight to 20 sessions. The first four steps involve helping partners recognize that the problem is not their individual personalities per se, but the negative cycle of communication in which they're stuck. In the next three steps, the therapist works with couples to promote sharing, soothing and bonding, before helping the couple incorporate those acts into everyday life in the last two steps. This final process of showing couples how to keep their connection alive can help prevent relapse.

To better understand how EFT works, it's instructive to see it in action. Take the story of Mary and Harry, married seven years, with one child. Both are managers by profession, but they expressed that they were puzzled by their inability to "manage" their marriage. They said they had lost a sense of intimacy and were no longer making love. In addition, Mary had discovered "very friendly" e-mails to her husband from a female colleague of his. Although Harry wasn't having an affair, Mary was distraught at the thought of her husband sharing more with this woman than he was with her. Both spouses were thinking about splitting up. But the key snippets of conversations below demonstrate how EFT helped restore their connection.

#### Step 1. Partners lay their problems on the table

Describing a recent fight in detail often helps partners begin to identify core problems.

Most couples fight about pragmatic issues--laundry or paying bills, for instance--but it's the emotional needs underlying these tiffs that need attention. The following conversation between Mary and Harry illustrates their negative pattern of communication as the two argue about Harry's reaction to her frequent mood swings: As she complains, he gets defensive and withdraws.

Mary: He doesn't care about anything but work. He has a love affair with his computer. I've had enough. I don't even know who he is anymore. [To Harry] You never reach for me! Am I supposed to do all the work in this relationship?

Harry: You are so difficult. I try to talk to you, and all I get is how I can never do anything right. It's always the same: You're angry, and you lecture me a thousand times a day, so I guess I do go downstairs to my computer.

Step 2. Partners recognize the cycle that's keeping them distant and try to identify the needs and fears that are fueling that cycle

As couples more carefully explore the underlying source of their arguments, they begin to realize that the enemy is not the partner but the unhealthy behaviors in their relationship. In this step, couples use nonevaluative language to uncover any fears they might have--of rejection, say, or failure--which are driving the relationship dynamic. In the following exchange, note how Harry and Mary are beginning to explore each other's motivations.

Harry [to me]: Yes, I do turn away. I try to move away from the message that I'm a big disappointment, and the more I move away, the madder she gets. Maybe she feels like she is losing me.

Mary: I feel you've gone off to another land. So, I bang on the door louder, trying to get your attention, trying to tell you we need to do something.

Step 3. Partners articulate the emotions behind their behavior

At this point, my role is to help both partners understand and clearly explain what's driving their behaviors, while ensuring that the other is also gaining an accurate understanding. Below, Mary realizes that she's not really angry with Harry but frantic to gain his affection. Harry realizes that he withdraws not because he doesn't want to be with Mary but because he doesn't want to be criticized or face his fear that their marriage is in danger.

Mary: I start to feel really desperate. That's what you don't hear. If I can't get you to respond, well...[she throws up her hands in a show of defeat].

Harry: I shut down just to get away from the message that I am so disappointing. I can't let it in; it's upsetting. In a way, it's terrifying, so I move away and hope you will calm down.

Step 4. Partners realize they're both hurting and that neither is to blame

As the couple begins to see the negative dynamic as the source of their problems, they

become more aware of their own needs for attachment, as well as those of their partner. Armed with empathy, partners can now approach their problems with a less combative mind-set. In the following exchange, Mary and Harry begin to see the cycle as a common enemy and discover new hope for the future.

Mary: The more desperate I get, the more I push; and the more scared you get, the more you shut down.

Harry: Maybe it's that we both get scared. I never knew you were so scared of losing me. I never knew you needed me that much.

Mary: Maybe we can step out of this, if we try it together.

Step 5. Partners identify and admit their hurts and fears

At this stage, my role becomes even more integral. Their honesty makes them feel increasingly vulnerable, and my job is to encourage and support them and to help them remain responsive to each other. In this exchange, Harry and Mary risk expressing their deepest feelings.

Harry: I don't know how to tell you how deep the pit is that I go into when I hear that I have failed, that I can't make it with you. I freeze. I shut down.

Mary: I never saw that you were hurting. I guess I saw you as calm and in control, almost indifferent, like you didn't need me at all, and that is the loneliest feeling in the world. There is no "us." I am alone.

Step 6. Partners begin to acknowledge and accept the other's feelings and their own new responses to those feelings

After years of believing a partner's behavior indicates one thing, it's difficult to accept that it actually means another. In step six, couples learn to trust these newly revealed motivations and, in turn, experience new reactions to these motivations. Note how Harry and Mary now listen to each other and exhibit mutual compassion.

Harry: I never saw how small you felt. I guess you were screaming for me when I saw you screaming at me. I don't want you to feel small and alone.

Mary: I didn't think I was getting through to you. I feel awful when you tell me that you'd freeze up inside. I guess I was having an impact. I was trying to get you to let me in.

Step 7. Partners are drawn together through the expression of their emotional needs

At this stage, partners are willingly available to each other, so when talking about their vulnerabilities, they're able to assure each other and soothe hurt feelings. This becomes the most emotional part of the therapeutic process as couples like Harry and Mary create a new, bonding cycle that begins to replace the old, destructive one.

Harry: I want you to give me a chance to learn how to be close to you. I can't deal with being labeled a failure. I want to let you in--I want to be close--but I need to feel safe, like you are going to give me the benefit of the doubt.

Mary: It's scary to feel lonely when you turn away. I need reassurance. If I tell you "I need some holding, some 'us' time," I want to know that you'll be there. I want to feel safe again. [In response, Harry holds her tightly.]

#### Step 8. Partners create new solutions to their problems

In step eight, partners share the new story of their relationship and how hard they worked to rewrite it together. Processing this experience and viewing their history in a different light allows couples to find newer, healthier ways of approaching pragmatic problems. Here we see Harry--who once ran and hid from the relationship--actively create more opportunities to bond with Mary.

Harry: We can have time together in the evening, after our kid is in bed. Let's make coffee and sit together, and if you trust me a little, I'll make us a schedule for nights out. It makes me feel good to know you need time with me.

#### Step 9. Partners consolidate their new positions and cycles of behavior

After months of work, it's vital that the couple continues to remember what first got them off track and how they found their way back. Without reassessing this process, maintaining this new cycle will lose importance and ultimately lead to a relapse. As Harry and Mary reflect on their therapy experience, both clearly see how they first became distressed and what they did to repair the relationship.

Harry: It was when I got promoted that it all started. I needed to prove myself to everybody. I did get immersed in work, but now when I hear that tone in your voice I remember how much you need me, and I want to reassure you: I am here, Mary. I know we can do this now. We're learning to trust each other again. It's like we are finding the "us" we had when we got married. We still fight sometimes, but these close times make all the difference.

For the right people, EFT can work magic. In less than four months, it brought Katie and Mike Martin back from the brink of divorce. "We discovered that our marriage was built on these ludicrous underlying assumptions," Katie says now. "Mike had this sense of entitlement and believed I should be there for him no matter what. I, coming from a dysfunctional family, believed I wasn't worthy of more consideration than that. When we realized how off our perceptions were, we giggled about it."

More important than the levity these revelations brought were the changes that grew out of them. Mike cut back on his office hours and is enjoying spending more time with Katie. And they don't feel childish, as they had before, when asking each other for "close time." "We've learned not to sacrifice intimacy for independence," Katie concludes. "One of the greatest joys of marriage is discovering how much we need each other."

Sadly, for some couples it may be too late. EFT is not designed for people who have tried

unsuccessfully to reconnect for so long that they've already mourned the lost relationship and become completely detached. It's also not appropriate for abusive relationships. But if, despite your obstacles, you still desire to make your relationship work, I encourage you to see an EFT-trained therapist.

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