

Johnson, S. (2008). *Hold me tight*. New York: Little, Brown, & Company. ISBN: 978-0-316-11300-7 (320 pp). \$25.99 (hc).

*Reviewed by Marina Dorian*

More and more couples are looking to play an active role in their treatment and often request up-to-date self help books that they can understand and apply at home without having a doctoral degree in psychology. Sue Johnson has given us such a resource. Finally we have a streamlined version of Emotion Focused Couple Therapy (EFT), a leading empirically supported treatment for couples, written for lay people with a matter of fact discussion of the research literature and couple therapy. In part one, Johnson attempts to answer the question: What is love? She begins with a brief definition and history of attachment theory, which is the theoretical underpinning of her version of EFT and an introduction to research supporting its use. The conversational manner of the book, with appropriate stories and self-disclosure, feels more like a conversation with Johnson rather than a didactic self help book.

EFT, originally an experiential approach with an emphasis on underlying emotional expression, is an exception to the experiential de-emphasis on theory. Johnson draws on attachment theory and suggests that emotion organizes attachment responses and serves a communicative function in relationships. Johnson asserts that dependency is a natural human proclivity. We all have a need for love and security that does not end in adulthood. Contrary to Bowen's family systems model with differentiation of self as a goal of the healthy adult, Johnson pulls from Bowlby's attachment theory and applies it to couple conflict. According to Johnson, it is emotional bonds that are at the heart of marital disputes, not conflicts over control. Couples fight and escalate fights for fear of losing each other, coined "attachment panic." When partners express their vulnerability and underlying softer emotions directly, they are more likely to elicit a compassionate response from their partner. But when an insecurely attached partner fears vulnerability and shows hard

emotions like anger instead, the response from his partner is likely to be withdrawal, leading to a common demand-withdrawal pattern. Thus the person most in need of the attachment bond may be afraid to expose his underlying need, and inadvertently push away the one he loves or longs to get close to. The antidote is to help partners recognize and relax their defensive fears so that more genuine emotions can emerge, and to unite together against their maladaptive pattern.

In part two of the book, Johnson walks the reader through seven transforming conversations that capture the main techniques of EFT and the defining moments in couples' relationships. Through case examples and exercises, she instructs couples in reshaping their difficult moments and recurring fights to create the secure bond that couples yearn for. She shares experience from over 20 years of working with couples and uses wit and wisdom to formulate memorable analogies for couples to have a language to talk about their conflictual patterns. The first conversation begins with recognizing the three "Demon Dialogues," thus helping couples identify their critical and destructive patterns. "Find the Bad Guy" involves finger pointing and blame that lead to a common pattern of criticism and defending. Using a couple dance analogy of a "Protest Polka," Johnson describes the popular pursuer/distancer pattern. In "Freeze and Flee," couples give up and resign to withdraw and stonewall. By helping partners to see each other's moves, they can better see the feedback loop. Couples see the entire picture of their dance, including how each partner's moves affect the other, are mutually dependent, and are driven by attachment distress. Such patterns cannot be solved with logical problem solving or communication training alone. Partners are taught to unify together to see the pattern as the enemy, rather than each other, and to create safety by talking about their underlying attachment and emotional needs.

The second conversation, "Finding the Raw Spots," coaches couples to look beyond their impulsive reactions to each other during conflict and to take a step back to observe and find out what vulnerabilities are being rubbed. In the third conversation,

“Revisiting a Rocky Moment,” couples are taught to de-escalate conflict and repair rifts while building emotional safety. The fourth conversation is the heart of the program, “Hold Me Tight,” which moves partners into being more emotionally accessible, responsive, and engaged with each other. The remaining three conversations aid couples in forgiving injuries, strengthening their emotional connection through sexual intimacy, resolving sexual problems, and maintaining their emotional connection to keep their love alive for the long haul. Part three addresses the power of love to heal traumatic wounds and to enhance our sense of connection in the world.

Johnson argues in her book that the facts of a fight or specific areas of disagreement are not the real issue in couple conflict. It is the strength of the emotional (attachment) bond. Although I agree with the importance of attachment and explanatory power of the theory, one criticism of EFT is that it does not address the role of context or family stress that many couples today face, from the failing financial and housing markets to military deployment, to name a couple of examples.

EFT shares commonalities with Jacobsen and Christensen’s Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy (IBCT), also available in a couple friendly version entitled *Reconcilable Differences*. Both approaches help couples to recognize their destructive patterns and to uncover the soft emotions underlying harder ones, as well as encourage partners to unify together against such patterns in a way that detaches them from participating in the destructive dance. Yet the difference is in the underlying theory, maintaining factors, and proposed mechanisms of change. In EFT, it is attachment fears that drive couple conflict and attachment security that enhances couples’ connection and engagement, while in IBCT, it is the addition of acceptance and mindful awareness to a behavioral approach that leads couples to give up their struggles to change each other.

Overall, *Hold Me Tight* is a valuable contribution to couple therapy and the self help literature. This is a book I will recommend to my clients, students, and colleagues.

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