Deciphering the Language of Love

By Sue Johnson

Attachment science is helping couples master communication and connection—and getting through conflict

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Much of the anguish and the elation in our lives begins with a glance, a kiss and then—a lifelong struggle to make sense of the verb *to love*. Patients have faith that their doctor can set a broken bone or offer pills to adjust their blood pressure. But poets, philosophers and psychologists alike have long seen love as intangible and nebulous, beyond our abilities to define. As one young man with whom I worked said, "I don't think anyone has ever had any real idea about this love thing, and you don't either." Love is a many-splendored, *mysterious* thing. How, people wonder, can I or anyone else proffer advice on enigmatic matters of the heart?

In my experience as a researcher and couples therapist, I have encountered many, many people trying to tackle that puzzle. Countless times I have heard: "I don't know what went wrong with my relationship … and I have no idea how to put it right."

In fact, there are real, research-backed ways to help people understand and strengthen love. For several decades now the science of attachment has stirred a quiet revolution. We know, for instance, that patterns of behavior learned in childhood form a template for our adult relationships. At a deeper level we can see the evolutionary and biological richness of love and affection; our connections have measurable effects on our body and health. Perhaps most excitingly, we have studied ways to guide couples toward healthier relationships. In a sense, attachment science, which once focused on the bonds between mother and child, has "grown up" and illuminated myriad powerful predictors for happy couples.

There is a need for that knowledge. In a Pew Research Center survey published in 2012, for example, 84 percent of people saw marriage as a very important life goal—and a Pew survey released in 2010 revealed that most people see love as the basis of marriage. The bulk of people seem to agree with Harvard Medical School psychiatrist Robert Waldinger, who studies happiness,

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IN BRIEF

Love Conquers All

- People display characteristic patterns of attachment, often based on relationships with caregivers in childhood, that can shape friendships and romance throughout their life span.
- When someone is "securely attached," he or she feels confident that a loved one is reliable, supportive and responsive.
- Many couples struggle when partners distance themselves emotionally from each other. Emotionally focused therapy helps people bridge these gaps and communicate their needs and feelings.

that the single best recipe for a good life, health and joy is a loving relationship. As a corollary to these beliefs, today relationship troubles are a top reason people seek help from mental health professionals like myself.

Over the years the science of attachment has advanced to the point where it gives us a concrete map to the *practice* of love, to optimizing adult relationships—even very challenging romantic ones. In my own work, I have developed and tested a therapeutic approach that can guide couples toward stronger, more supportive relationships. The latest research confirms and also challenges some of our cherished beliefs about the nature of love. Most important, it does indeed have much to tell us about how to actively shape our romantic relationships for the better.

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A Mother's Love

Consider the bond between parent and child. For much of the 20th century we dismissed children's need for safe connection such that parents routinely dropped their sick children off at the hospital to be cared for by strangers without considering whether this might be traumatizing. Mental health professionals espoused theories that saw unhappy families as victims of *too much* closeness and not enough separation. Separating parent and child was deemed necessary to build strength.

The flaws in this thinking began to appear half a century ago thanks to a series of experiments by psychologists John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. In an effort to crack the code of human bonding, they observed interactions between mothers and their infants, then watched how behaviors changed when the two were separated in an unfamiliar environment.

These "strange situation" experiments revealed that some infant-mother exchanges predictably led to calm and positive behaviors in the child, whereas others did not. As revealed in Bowlby's 1969 book *Attachment and Loss*, such scenarios can illuminate patterns in the way children behave that relate to their connection to their

mother. Ainsworth later identified three basic "styles" of attachment that could explain these patterns.

Separation, broadly, causes distress. But for some children, the nature of their bond with their mother is such that when they are left alone, they do not panic. Instead they are curious and can explore a new environment without fear. Parents in these relationships communicated their love and care clearly, and children were comforted by their mother's attentions. Ainsworth called this form of attachment "secure." Secure children display emotional balance, confidence, and an ability to explore and learn. Their sense that their parents provided a safe haven, led to strong children who could connect openly with others as they matured.

But other infants displayed a distinctly different set of behaviors. "Insecure, anxiously attached" children were overwhelmed by the pain and uncertainty of separation. Their parents, when present in the experiments, tended to be less accessible, responsive and engaged. The children's emotional responses were intense. They flipped from anger to panic when calling out to their parent, and when comforted by a mother, they clung to her, as though unwilling to trust that everything was, in fact, okay.

Another group of insecurely attached children showed very little emotion when their mother left or returned. They focused instead on toys and objects. They did not ask for their parent nor did they respond to her comfort. They avoided closeness. Research has since revealed that many of these "avoidant" children are just as upset as their anxious peers but are adept at shutting down their responses, most probably as a consequence of unresponsive or even abusive parenting. They have no expectation of a safe connection.

By the 1980s researchers began to recognize that these patterns could inform adult relationships—including romantic ones. The responses associated with each attachment style become automatic as we grow up and can color the way we think and feel about ourselves in relation to others. For example, we may struggle to trust others if we could not rely on our parents—and a lack of early attention may leave some people unsure whether they are even entitled to another person's care.

Like muscle memory, these patterns kick in when we are vulnerable in romantic relationships. Secure partners tend to have better relationships and better mental health in general. They expect to be responded to and loved. Anxiously attached partners are vigilant for rejection and tend to pursue their partner with intense emotional demands. Avoidant individuals turn away from their partners, especially when they or their lover becomes vulnerable; they dismiss their own and their lover's attachment needs.

Indeed, a longitudinal study, published in 2007 by University of Minnesota psychologists, confirmed the longevity of these patterns. The team worked with 78 young adults who had been studied from infancy. In the study, people who had exhibited secure attachment as one-year-olds were more socially competent in elementary school than people who had lacked secure attachment. That competence in turn predicted better friendships as teenagers—and stronger social connections at age 16 linked to better romantic relationships when the participants were between 20 and 23 years old. Meanwhile other research has made it clear that people exposed to violence and other severe relationship dysfunction in early life not only may develop insecure at-

tachment but are more vulnerable to mental illness and becoming caught in repeat scenarios of abuse as adults.

Entrenched anxious and avoidant styles tend to seed disconnection and relationship distress, which makes it harder for the other partner to stay attuned and responsive. But there is hope. The latest wave of research, of which I have been a part, has investigated ways to modify these patterns and how doing so can truly change someone's life.

Better Together

I began studying attachment science in the 1980s. At that time, I was seeing couples in therapy, and as I became aware of their powerful fears, needs and dilemmas, I began urgently seeking for a way to understand their struggles. Building on the emerging understanding of adult attachment, my colleagues and I developed emotionally focused therapy (EFT) as a short-term therapy grounded in that science.

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To understand how EFT works, we first need to consider a central tenet of attachment research. Namely, the love we feel from another person has an enormous effect on us, both physically and emotionally. Several studies have confirmed that conclusion in recent years.

One pivotal experiment, published in 2006 by James A. Coan, a neuroscientist at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, placed 16 married women in a magnetic resonance imaging machine and subjected them to the threat of electric shock during three different situations: they held their husband's hand, they held the hand of a male stranger or they lay alone in the machine. In each case, a large X appeared on a screen in front of the woman's eyes to warn her that a shock might be coming. The shock was delivered only 20 percent of the time.

Coan found that holding a mate's hand significantly reduced the activation of neural systems in the brain associated with emotional and behavioral threat responses—such as the right anterior insula, superior frontal gyrus and hypothalamus. This act also lessened the amount of pain reported as a result of that shock. Being alone or holding a stranger's hand, however, offered no significant benefit. Furthermore, people who had more supportive marriages, as measured with a questionnaire, seemed to experience the most relief.

Coan's finding is one of various studies that have found that a loved one's presence can modulate neurophysiological responses, such as heart rate and the release of stress hormones. Intriguingly, a series of experiments, published in 2012, revealed that even just imagining an attachment figure can have profound effects. In this work, Emre Selçuk, a psychologist then at Cornell University, and his colleagues encouraged 105 women to determine their attachment style using a questionnaire. These participants then wrote extensively about two vivid and upsetting personal memories. For each story, they created triggers of one to three words and practiced reliving the emotions associated with those moments using just the trigger words. Selçuk next asked the women to trigger those memories while imagining that they were receiving comfort from either their mother or an acquaintance. Then the women rated their emotional response in terms of how positively or how negatively they felt on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 was not at all, and 7 was extreme. Imagining one's mother—but not an acquaintance—helped people bounce back from the pain and sadness of their unhappy memory, provided they had secure attachment styles. In a second version of this experiment, Selçuk found this recovery also occurred when people looked at a photograph of their mother as opposed to someone else's mother. Both these studies make it clear that we can gain tremendous emotional strength from simply thinking about our attachment figures.

In a third version of the study, Selçuk and his colleagues asked 30 couples to look at a picture of their romantic partner while recalling a difficult experience. As one might expect, securely attached individuals benefited more than others from this exercise. But in an interesting twist, the researchers discovered that partners who reported greater emotional recovery were also healthier, based on observations made one month later. For example, they had less pain and anxiety and were less likely to miss work for health reasons.

That finding was just a correlation, showing physical health and a strong relationship are connected—so it cannot prove that one factor caused the other. Nevertheless, the bulk of attachment research suggests that healthy relationships support healthy lives. As Coan's findings revealed, we feel more at ease in the presence of certain people. Therefore, cultivating those special relationships may help us weather life's uncertainties, which would certainly make us healthier overall.

In that light, our relationships are part of our species' survival code. Secure attachment offers us a potent sense of safety and a way to maintain equilibrium in the presence of danger or threat. These bonds allow us to tolerate and cope with our human frailty. And when we view others as a trusted resource, this perspective fundamentally changes our perception of danger, disaster and pain. The old cliché about how love makes us stronger seems to be accurate.

Helping Couples Connect

The most common problem that relationships face is emotional disconnection. For example, conflict can cause one person to withdraw or stonewall the other. As a result, one partner creates emotional distance from the other. That disconnect triggers the distress of separation—much like the strange situations—which, in turn, can cue a cascade of protest, clinging and pain in the person who feels abandoned. To make matters worse, these situations can be cyclical: emotional distance causes a partner to become enraged or desperate, driving the other farther away.

In the moment, these patterns can look like simple disagreements, often sparked by a perfectly banal problem. But attachment theory suggests that these fights are also dilemmas of disconnection. The threat of emotional isolation can spark either reactive anger (as when a partner declares, "I will make you respond to me") or a numbed shutdown (as in, "I can never please, you so I will just zone out and block you").

In my work, I have found that these meltdowns are more about the pain of emotional disconnection and misguided attempts to reconnect than the conflict per se or even differences in personality. This viewpoint challenges the notion that romantic love is something we simply fall into and out of. Instead attachment science suggests love is *within* our control—we just need to understand how attachment operates.

Thus, the first goal of EFT is to help partners see how they are both caught in a recurring dance of emotional disconnection, triggering each other into aggressively demanding a response or freezing up and shutting down. As a result, they can begin to have a meta-perspective on love, to see how their vulnerabilities are wired into their brain as bonding mammals and to help each other out of these "demon dialogues" that leave them alone and helpless. The second goal is to help partners move, when needing contact or support, into positive experiences of secure connection. That is, we need to show them how to have bonding conversations, in which both partners pinpoint and share specific attachment fears and needs in ways that pull the other close. Partners in these potent bonding conversations may openly share fears of rejection or loneliness and then ask for reassurance in a way that makes it easy for the other to respond. My colleagues and I have observed and then systematically coded these steps in conversation to rate the depth of emotional sharing and how partners reach and respond to each other. Doing so has allowed us to pinpoint transforming moments where successful bonding occurs as well as the moments where this process of attunement and responsiveness gets blocked.

As we noted in a 2013 review, our observations offer many hints as to when and how EFT helps couples to resolve their problems. Not everyone makes progress, but those people who do share important commonalities. For example, we have found that EFT benefits couples who take the time during therapy to delve into and explore their emotional experiences. They disclose more of their perspective. People who soften their tendency to lay blame also show improved relationship satisfaction after therapy. The blend of intimacy, vulnerability and a more forgiving viewpoint seems to be a crucial mix.

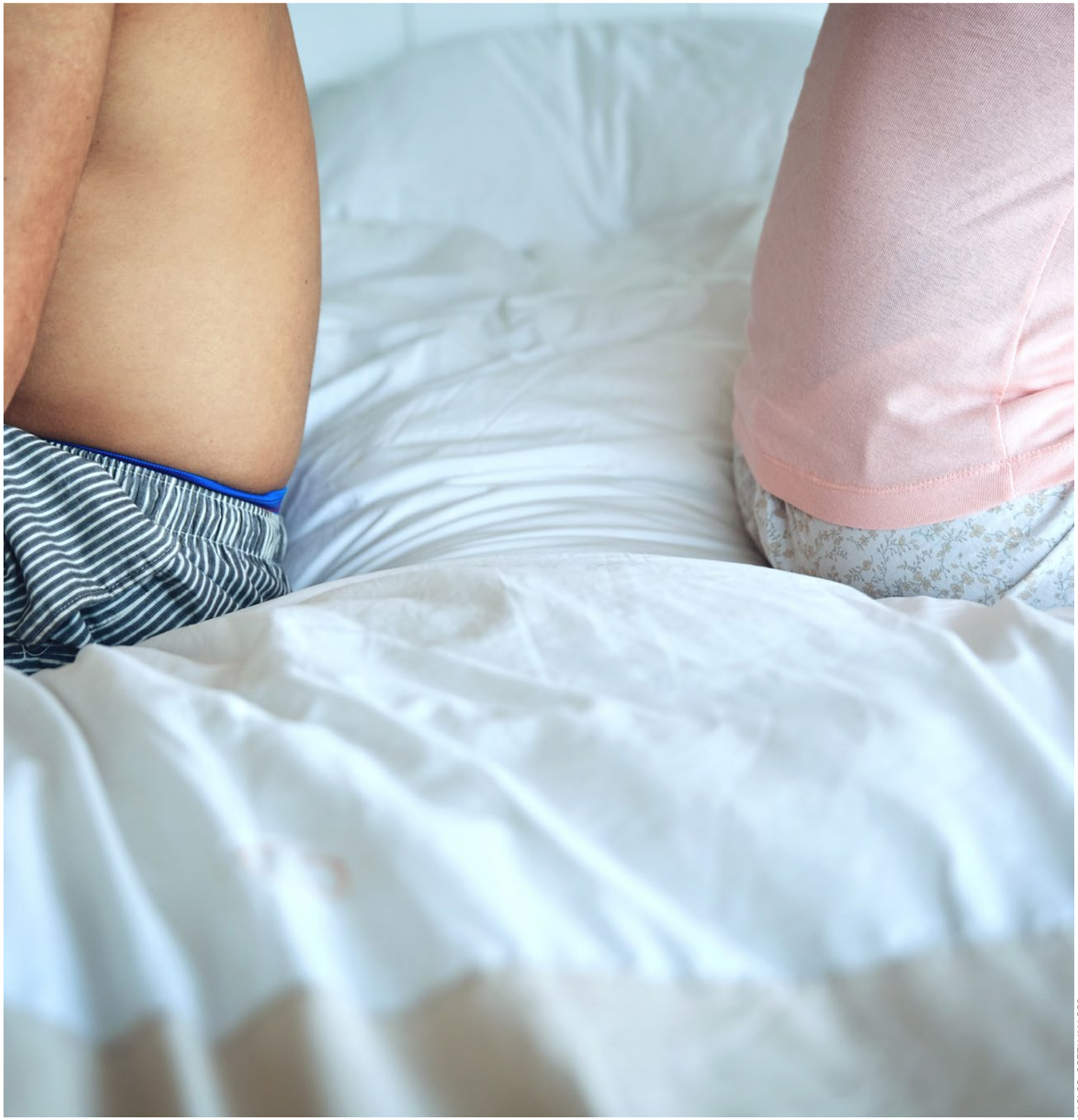
This stage of the process also helps people build up a trio of crucial relationship skills: accessibility, responsiveness and engagement. Accessibility refers to our openness and willingness to turn to and attend to one another. Responsiveness is the abil-

ity to tune into and respond to a partner's emotional signals. Engagement is the ability to stay close and attuned to another's emotions and remain close. In clinical work, we see these qualities captured in the common question: "Are you there for me?" Fundamentally, when people know that the answer to that query is a resounding yes, they are securely attached.

Breaking the Mold

EFT is now the gold standard in tested couple interventions. Though not the only approach for couples therapists, it is unique in its integration with attachment science. Some psychologists make use of behavioral techniques that aim to tackle symptoms of distress, such as mutual blaming, by teaching skills such as active listening and rational negotiation. But few approaches have as strong an evidence base as EFT. To date, researchers have validated it in numerous studies, with many different kinds of couples and relationship problems. Better still, the positive effects of this therapy appear to last across time.

In one of our most interesting findings yet, we discovered that EFT can measurably change someone's attachment style. In



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2016 we published a study of 32 distressed couples who attended 20 sessions of EFT. At the start of this endeavor, all the participants said that they were unhappy with their partner. Furthermore, they were chronically emotionally disconnected, meaning they could not safely confide or trust the other person to be there for them when needed.

In addition to requesting the participants to rate themselves on questionnaires, we asked them to discuss a specific relationship conflict at the beginning and end of therapy. Using that information, we determined their attachment style. Although they began with insecure attachment (either anxious or avoidant), by the end of therapy partners rated themselves and each other as securely attached. They were emotionally accessible, responsive and engaged. They also felt that they could get their needs for connection met from each other. A follow-up study, published in this year, found that two years later, these couples still saw their bond as secure and loving.

These studies reveal that the patterns of bonding we learn in early childhood are not immutable. We can change them for the better. Moreover, this process is clearly worthwhile. Our research also suggests that because EFT improves the quality of romantic relationships, it can not only decrease distress caused by conflicts the couple has with each other, it also can build up each partner's resilience to stress. For example, in a 2013 paper we asked 24 couples to participate in brain imaging and made use of the same methods as Coan's hand-holding experiment. We found that before therapy, holding a husband's hand did not buffer women against the dread or pain of an electric shock—but after therapy, it did.

Other teams have confirmed that improvements EFT brings to relationship quality can bolster well-being more broadly. In a 2017 pilot study conducted at the Baltimore VA Medical Center, researchers assigned 15 couples, in which one partner was a military veteran who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, up to 36 weeks of EFT. They found that both partners showed better psychological health after therapy and that veterans reported significantly fewer symptoms of their disorder.

EFT gives people the skills to sculpt and keep love. It demonstrates how the new science of attachment can serve as a guide to relationship repair and stability. Although love will always be magical, we can now define the outlines of this emotional bond and know it for what it is. That knowledge is remarkable in itself and part of the great mosaic of findings that science offers us to pursue not just longer but also healthier, happier and more fulfilling lives. Our best relationships, after all, buoy us up amid difficult times. As Mozart is said to have observed, "Love guards the heart from the abyss." That statement is more than just poetic. M

MORE TO EXPLORE

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