

Comparison of Relationship Enhancement Therapy and Emotionally Focused Therapy

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An email inquiry was received at NIRE observing that Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) has “a very high success rate” and asking how the EFT approach compares to the Relationship Enhancement Therapy approach, and whether there has been any direct comparison of the two in any of our outcome studies. What follows is my response to this inquiry.

Dear John,

Thank you for writing.

Relationship Enhancement (RE) Therapy and Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) are probably two of the best researched couple therapies. EFT has very good research behind it. So does RE. The research on RE has consistently demonstrated (a) the effectiveness of RE on a number of outcome measures and (b) the superior effectiveness of RE compared to every other method with which it has been compared on at least some outcome measures. Finally, two studies show untypical but highly positive outcomes at 6-month and 1-year follow-up, where instead of the typically anticipated decline relative to the gains made at post-test, couples showed a continuing *increase* in gains at a statistically significant level. All in all, I think these are highly positive outcomes testifying to the power and clinical effectiveness of RE.

For a comprehensive review of the research on RE, please consult the chapter on RE in the APA book: *Humanistic Psychotherapies: Handbook of Research & Practice*. This chapter has been reprinted in NIRE's *RE Therapist Manual* (item M-101 on the www.nire.org Bookstore). A somewhat more selective summary of the research on RE is to be found in ch. 2 of my book *Relationship Enhancement Therapy: Healing Through Deep Empathy and Intimate Dialogue* (Routledge, 2005).

In response to your specific question, there has been no research, to my knowledge, directly comparing RE and EFT. I think the fairest conclusion is that both methods are highly effective, each in its own unique way.

In response to your other question concerning how the RE approach compares to the EFT approach, I would suggest 2 principal differences, one having to do with the nature of the therapeutic process in each model, the other having to do with the role of the therapist in the therapeutic process, though in the end these two aspects go hand in hand with one another.

With regard to therapeutic process, RE has always been conceived as a psycho-educational approach to therapy with a strong focus on intensive skills training designed to help couples permanently change unhelpful patterns of behavior into more constructive patterns of interpersonal behavior, and in the process deepen connection and mutual understanding. Indeed, I

think RE may well have been the original psycho-educational model in the domain of therapy. The key skill that is explicitly taught to couples - though there are others - is deep empathy. This skill, together with the other skills that are incorporated into a couple's dialogue process, becomes the basis for how the core of the therapeutic work is done, namely, by the couples themselves dialoguing and empathizing with one another about their issues, following the specific guidelines of the RE skills, with the dialogue process being facilitated by the therapist.

These aspects of the therapeutic process in RE point to corresponding aspects of the role of the therapist in RE Therapy. In RE, the therapist's role is a multifaceted one of (a) teacher and modeler of the RE skills and (b) coach and facilitator of the couple's dialogue process, which includes specialized RE techniques for managing and deepening the couple's dialogue process. This entire process is designed to (a) deepen connection, (b) facilitate and deepen enhanced mutual understanding, (c) uncover or recover the deeper well of love in the relationship, (d) replace old unhelpful patterns of behavior with new, more functional patterns of behavior that give the couple the opportunity to permanently change their interactional patterns with one another, (e) solve some of the more immediate problems in the relationship, and (f) generalize their changes in behavior to their daily lives and to other important relationships in their lives.

EFT, by contrast, is a more traditional therapy model in two senses. The first is that - at least as originally conceived - EFT has little emphasis on skills training. (My understanding is that both Les Greenberg and Susan Johnson have made some moves in the direction of more overt skills training, but this has always been at the very heart of RE Therapy, not an add-on to an essentially different model.) Instead, the focus in EFT is on overcoming the couple's imbedded disconnection in such a manner that (like RE) the goal is to transform the couple's "dance" in order to teach them how to dance together in a new way, and thereby reestablish emotional connection. In this sense, the goal in EFT is really no different than it is in RE, at least in this one important respect. The difference comes in how the change is effected.

And here we come to the difference in the role of the therapist in EFT versus RE. In EFT, the therapist operates on a more traditional model of leading the process him or herself. I conceive the role of the therapist in EFT as analogous to the role of a conductor with an orchestra, in that the therapist leads and conducts the therapy process. Now the EFT therapist can do very sophisticated work, as I have observed Sue Johnson to do (and I admire her work very much). And one of the key tools of the EFT therapist is to employ empathy to connect with and help the couple understand one another and their disconnection more deeply, for the purpose of rebuilding connection. In this sense, EFT and RE share a common reliance on a Rogerian emphasis on the importance of empathy to the therapeutic process.

The key difference, however, is that in EFT it is primarily the therapist that uses empathy, whereas in RE couples are explicitly taught and shown how to deeply empathize with one another and how to incorporate that into their own personal dialogues with one another - not just to address current issues in the therapy, but also to be able to take these new skills into their relationship on a permanent basis so that they can address future issues on their own more successfully, thereby reducing the likelihood that they need to return to therapy in the future. I believe that this is the factor that explains the positive results of the two research studies referred

to above where there were continued gains at follow-up compared to post-test.

In conclusion, I have no doubt about the relative and comparative effectiveness of RE and EFT as therapy interventions. They are both effective. I do believe, however, that the differences in focus and implementation of the therapies, in particular with regard to RE's intensive focus on psycho-educational skills training to empower couples to take charge of their own therapy process and their own future relationship, constitutes an important difference in that I think RE potentially stands a better chance of effecting and maintaining longer term gains. But this is a hypothesis that would have to be subjected to an empirical test - not necessarily an easy proposition. Even then, however, I think the differences might turn out to be relatively modest at best. Research is indeed important, but I think the (sometimes posited) goal of somehow coming up with "the one superior methodology to all others" is probably more a chimera than an attainable reality. I fully believe that there can be - and are - multiple methodologies that can be, relatively speaking, "equally" effective in attaining positive therapeutic results. And I definitely believe that RE and EFT are two of those methodologies - and that the research supports this proposition.

Sincerely,

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