

## **Back to the Basics – Emotionally Focused Psychotherapy Approach in Times of Unpredictability and Isolation**

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### **Abstract**

**Introduction:** *The paper outlines the basic concepts and principles of Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), the model developed by dr. Susan Johnson for couple therapy and then extended for individual and family work. A comprehensive list of references containing case presentations and researches is also provided, to illustrate the profound humanistic, non-judicative nature of the model.*

**Objectives:** *This paper aims at revealing the connection between the well-researched concepts of attachment needs and longings and the “basic music” of the emotions expressed by people when in danger of isolation, and, as such, their use and applicability in the psychotherapy and overall psychology field.*

**Methods:** *Literature review. Case illustration.*

**Results:** *Assessing the importance of attachment needs and longings and their influence on the clients’ strategies to face unpredictability and isolation, and encouraging further development of tools and approaches that can work directly with these hazards.*

**Conclusions:** *This paper highlights the consistent work that dr. Susan Johnson and collaborators have undergone during the past 25 years, focusing on the universality of this approach that can easily fit in a collective, ex-communist culture as the Romanian one.*

**Keywords:** *attachment, social brain, emotional focus, non-judicative*

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## **I. Introduction**

Emotionally focused therapy (EFT) has been articulated starting with the 80's (Greenberg and Johnson, 1985; Johnson and Greenberg, 1988) as a reaction to the lack of intervention techniques in couple therapy that also present scientific validation, especially the ones rooted in an experiential, humanistic perspective and less behavioristic. The title of the therapeutic approach draws our attention to the crucial significance of emotions and emotional communication in all sorts of close relationships, during an age when psychology and psychotherapy still did not give emotions their justified importance. Emotions were not completely ignored, but they were mere secondary complications that followed certain behaviors and/ or cognitions, thus dangerous or inefficient intruders that cannot represent change agents. As studies on emotion expanded (Plutchik, 2000; Tomkins, 1991; Lewis and Haviland-Jones, 2000, apud Johnson, 2004), professionals could no longer avoid their crucial role; concepts as emotional regulation and emotional engagement related to marital satisfaction needed to be addressed and connected with the affective development of humankind based on the attachment system (Johnson, 2004).

EFT was built and refined as a model of intervention upon the systematic analysis of couple dynamics during therapy; the need to reconsider traditional approaches became more and more pressuring as Les Greenberg and Susan Johnson noticed in their work that change does not last, and, after a short time, couples return in therapy with the same issues. As the model adheres to the strong philosophy that relationships are at the core of human experience and related research indicates that emotionally fulfilling relationships are integral components of mental and physical health, the purpose became clearer: emotionally focused interventions have to be designed in such way to have the power to establish and recreate supportive bonds among individuals.

EFT practitioners are therefore committed to:

- understanding and enhancing couple and family relationships through an emphasis on emotions and their interpersonal impact;
- fostering a climate of respect, endless empathic attunement and authenticity;
- keeping a wide, humanistic view of problems encountered by the couple members – in EFT there is no room for judgment, clients hold their deep, natural reasons for being stuck;

- rewriting the love story so that relationship represents the safe, secure environment within that the couple can flourish.

According to its creator, the whole process is a journey (Johnson, 2004):

- from alienation to emotional involvement;
- from a highly vigilant self-defense and self-protection to opening and tacking risks;
- from the feeling of hopelessness when the whole “relationship dance” unfolds to actively co-creating the dance;
- from desperate accusing the partner to acknowledging the contribution of each actor involved;
- from focusing on partner's flaws to uncovering one's fears;
- and most importantly, from ISOLATION to CONNECTION.

The roots of EFT combine a synthesis of systemic and experiential techniques. The novelty is represented by the way that marital problems are viewed – as interaction patterns that are fueled by the way people organize and process emotional experiences. A couple with a high level of dysfunctionality is the result of a series of automatic emotional responses and a rigid set of interactions; the automatic, rigid pattern narrows significantly the options in the experience of the couple. The emotional music and the resulting steps that each of the partners follows in their relationship dance strengthen their position within a negative circularity of sufferance and despair. That, in turn, leads to an almost impossible mission: accessing and bringing sensitivity to the couple's partners. The EFT practitioner sees partners as being “stuck” and refuses to use terms such as “deficient” or “sick”.

The experiential approach sees people as trapped into rigid models of information processing and in the cycles of negative emotions that in turn limit their response register. The systemic perspective speaks about people that are constrained by certain patterns and regulations in their relationships. Both approaches pinpoint the importance of therapist's alliance with the couple in assisting them in creating positions, patterns and internal processing modalities that are more flexible. EFT combines the two above, but applies the attachment lens derived from the work of John Bowlby as the basis for understanding love in the adult relationships. We see them as rigid models or as strict patterns, but the reality of a couple's dynamics

makes sense only if one can uncover the underlying unmet needs. Automatic and rigid responses are created as a systematic strategy used to regulate the pain of disconnection, the pressure of isolation combined with the confusion of being unable to predict what the future holds.

Johnson (2004) defines several basic postulates that underpin the core of the Emotionally Focused Therapy:

- a. Emotional bonds are the optimal setup for intimacy; the main issues in couple contradictions are thus derived from the level of safety in these bonds; secure bonds are created through connection at the emotional level.
- b. Emotion is the key when it comes to attachment related behaviors, but also when it comes to how we perceive ourselves and the other within the context of an intimate relationship. Emotions guide us and give us meaning of what we perceive, they motivate actions and send signals. It is both a goal and a means of change within the couple's dynamics. Creating new, corrective emotional experiences is at the core of the EFT approach, bringing about change at both interpersonal and intrapersonal level.
- c. Relational problems are fueled by dominant emotional experiences of both partners, particularly by the way they organize and interpret these emotional encounters.
- d. The attachment needs and the desire to have a partner are healthy and adaptive. Emotional insecurity can lead to problems when the needs are not met and loneliness and isolation are overwhelming.
- e. Second order change (creating a new way of seeing things completely) is associated with accessing and recreating emotional experiences whilst highlighting each partners' position. Change has nothing to do with insights, catharsis or negotiations (specific to other approaches); change is dependent on the new, corrective emotional experiences, new interaction events that create authentic bonding moments for the couple.
- f. Emotional connection is the basic concept of EFT, referring to "that certain something" that was noticed to dramatically change the dynamics of a couple during therapy and did not represent any specific behavior change, seemed invisible, but extremely powerful

(Johnson, 2008). As previously noted, that has to do with the secure bond in-between the partners. This resonant instance offers the partners the possibility of hearing each other's need and thus he/ she may answer with the proper care that soothes his/her partner, overall creating the kind of bond that lasts.

## **II. Emotionally Focused Therapy – basic concepts and principles**

Considering the postulates described above, one can see that the client in the couple therapy, as EFT posits, is the relationship. Therefore, the therapist needs to apply a lens of theories that allows him or her to understand as well as possible the nature of the adult intimacy. In her early practice, Susan Johnson observed that, regardless of age, culture and education, when couples are asked about the foundation for a long, happy relationship, the answer is universal – love. So, naturally, things become easy if we understand love. And yet they are not, as in the field of couple therapy love is a variable at most avoided if not forgotten (Mackay, 1996; Roberts, 1992, apud Johnson, 2004).

Using the attachment theory to understand adult relationships is the revolutionary event that EFT brought to the field of couple therapy, mainly because it included it in a coherent, relevant model that can be used to better understand and then intervene in adult love dynamics. The approach is loyal to the ten principles described by the attachment theory first formulated by John Bowlby and then developed and adjusted for adult needs (P. Shaver and M. Mikulincer). These ten principles are as follows:

1. Attachment is an innate motivation force. Seeking and maintaining contact with significant others in our lives come naturally and motivate us throughout our lives. Being dependent on an affective level is not a mere childhood particularity that we lose as we grow up, nor is it a sign of pathology. Attachment and associated emotions are the essence when defining couple relationships and the key to solving the issues that come up in the couple or family dynamics.

2. Secure dependency is complementary to autonomy. From the attachment theory perspective there is no such thing as social independence or exaggerated levels of dependency. The correct distinction is to be made between an efficient and an inefficient dependency. Secure dependency and autonomy become facets of the same reality, complementing each other. Research points out that secure attachment is associated with a positive, more

coherent self-image (Mikulincer, 1995), the way openness is associated with communication in time of stress, optimistic evaluation of potential dangerous situations and confidence regarding strategies to cope with adversity (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, 2008; Mikulincer, Florian, & Weller, 1993, apud Dănilă, 2016). The better connected we are, the easier we can differentiate ourselves.

3. Secure attachment offers an essential “safe heaven”. Being in contact with significant others is a surviving mechanism that gets triggered instantly when we perceive danger. The physical presence of those we are attached to (parents, partners, children) gives comfort and safety, not being able to reach them leads to stress. The proximity of loved ones is not a commodity but a means to calm the nervous system (Schore, 1994), the natural antidote against anxiety, uncertainty, sadness. The effect was initially correlated with childhood, but later research shows that “safe heaven” is a need of all ages (Mikulincer, Florian & Weller, 1993).

4. Attachment creates a safe base. Once securely attached, the individual can explore the surroundings and efficiently respond to any challenges that might appear. The presence of a significant other as a safe base is linked with the encouragement to explore and with the openness to new information (Mikulincer, 1997). A consistent safe base is a frame where one can take risks, learn and adapt internal working models about oneself and the others. Secure attachment contributes to the ability to step back and reflect about ourselves, our behaviors and our own state of mind (Fonagy and Target, 1997). When safe, we are capable of offering support to others as well as facing conflicts and stress. As the safe base narrows or even disappears, we are prone to protest and suddenly find ourselves in an exhausting turmoil to get it back.

5. The true bonds are built through emotional responsiveness and accessibility. Attachment figures can be sometimes physically present but emotionally absent. In such moments the separation stress will signal the inaccessibility. In terms of attachment response, whether it is fury or fret, it is still better than no response at all. In such a context, emotions become the central guide leading towards understanding and normalizing extreme reactions that derive from relational stress. Emotions tell us where we are and communicate to others about our motivations and needs; as such, they are interpreted as the music that the couple follows in their relational dance (Johnson, 1996).

6. Fear and uncertainty activate almost instantly the attachment needs. When in danger,

powerful emotions flood the brain and the need for comfort and connection becomes pressuring. Danger can be associated with dramatic events, but also with everyday stress, illness and any other type of perils for the attachment bonds. The mechanism translates into actual reaching towards the attachments figure. The feeling that one is connected to his/her loved one is the most efficient solutions for such situations; being safely attached best protects against feelings of helplessness and uselessness (McFarlane and Van der Kolk, 1996).

7. The separation stress is a predictable process. When our attempts to get closer do not get us the responses that can comfort and connect us with the attachment figures, a specific, typical process starts: angry protesting, followed by sadness and avoidance, and then melting down in despair; if repair is not possible anymore, detachment remains the final response. Sadness is a natural response when one loses connection. Bowlby normalizes a lot of the angry behaviors that can seem dramatic in relationships, interpreting them as attempts to connect with an attachment figure that seems inaccessible. There is a clear distinction to be made in-between hopeful fury and desperate fury that can become coercive. In secure relationships, protest and inaccessibility are admitted, validated and accepted.

8. There are several forms of emotional engagement. The leading question is the same: “Can I count on you when I am in need?”. The attachment strategies get organized around 2 main dimensions: anxiety and avoidance (Fralely and Waller, 1998). When the bond is menaced, one’s attachment system can become hyperactivated. Behaviors such as pursuing, emotional insistence up to aggressive tendencies of control, have all the same purpose: to get an answer from the beloved one; any answer is better than no answer. From this perspective, critique, reproaches and requests that are fully emotionally loaded are decoded as attempts to face and resolve fears and pain. Other situations can bring apparently the opposite: one can deactivate the attachment system and suppress as much as possible the attachment needs. Most commonly these lead to obsessive focusing on other tasks, limiting or avoiding any emotional interaction with the attachment figures. Frequently, this second strategy can be described as highly autonomous and self-sufficient. A fully non-judicative perspective needs to underline the fact that emotional independence and direction to one self are not to be deemed completely unsuited and potentially alienating; on the

contrary, in the diverse situations that the adult can face, these can prove to be crucial; when it comes to attachment needs and longings, emotional autonomy and return to the self are more likely the “bitter sweet” strategies that the avoidant unsecured person calls upon as a consequence of the early experiences that have taught him/ her that one cannot trust the significant others (Dănilă, 2016).

9. Attachment contributes to the delineation of the image of self and the image of others. As much as some specialists encourage self-sufficiency, we define ourselves in the context of our closest relationships. The above discussed attachment strategies are specific modalities of emotion processing. When feeling rejected, some of us cry and turn things into a drama, others remain quiet and withdraw within themselves; the strategy also depends on the one that rejects us, sometimes we might be surprised to react differently – pursuing some attachment figures and avoiding others. Bowlby pointed out that these strategies are consistently related to our internal models of self and others. A securely attached person sees oneself as worthy of love and care, trustworthy and competent; therefore, the more attached, the more efficient one is (Mikulnicer, 1995). As expected, an insecure self-image and a not-trustworthy view of others lead to fear and isolation.

10. Isolation and loss are traumatizing. Attachment theory describes and explains the trauma of deprivation, loss, rejection and abandonment by those that we need so much. Bowlby considered these stressors as huge impactors upon the personality development and the instilling of one’s abilities to cope with everyday problems. When we are certain that those close to us are going to be there when we need them, we are less exposed to any fear as compared to persons who cannot be sure about it.

Considering these principles, and the postulates described before, a set of basic presumptions are at the core of the Emotionally Focused Therapy approach (Woolley and Johnson, 2005):

a) human relationships can be healed and developed despite the most tensioned context; people rely on specialized help mainly during stressful situations, therefore the best approach is the non-pathologizing one – instead of using etiquettes and diagnostics, the therapist must validate and accept the client’s experience and that is the path towards change;

b) creating and maintaining a collaborative therapeutic relation is essential for the healing process;

c) internal and external relational realities of one individual define one another; each individual

builds specific modalities of expressing emotions in his/ her significant relations, which in turn leads to specific patterns of involvement; consequently, these specific patterns lead to typical emotional responses; EFT, a systemic approach in its essence, brings internal realities as part of the relational system;

d) emotions are the primary factor in organizing the relations with the loved ones; their role is complex – they energize, motivate and communicate to others, even beyond what we can acknowledge;

e) the goal of developing, healing or changing the relation cannot be met only by reducing the tensions (the habitual milestone of other approaches) – we need to create new, corrective emotional experiences;

f) the attachment theory frame gives the therapist a veritable map for the “terrain” where the couple acts and interacts.

### **III. The EFT process – a map in an attachment frame**

The need for a map is central for the EFT approach, therefore the whole model is built on this metaphor – 3 main stages encompass a total of 9 steps that need to be explored while constantly using the attachment lens. The steps are not that of a ladder that the therapist must “climb” together with the clients, but closer to a dance routine step sequence that the therapist repeats over and over, as much as needed, until the couple can adapt their “dance” as they listen to each other’s emotions. The milestones are the 3 major events that seal the change of the relational pattern.

The first milestone is the result of the four steps in stage one – the de-escalation of the negative circularity; practically, the partners are helped to frame their conflicts in the terms of a negative pattern called the cycle, which, by the end of stage one, they learn to slow down in order to recognize the emotions that trigger it; the attachment reframe is the new understanding model that allows them to cease seeing each other as enemies; the cycle is the common “enemy” against which they need to fight together.

The next 2 milestones are both met in stage 2: first, the therapist must re-engage the partner that most frequently avoids (as a strategy of coping with disconnection) and then to soften the partner that most frequently pursues with protest and preoccupation. As such, the 5 to 7 series of steps is repeated for both partners as much as needed; less escalated, the partners can listen and support each other in exploring deeper emotions and expressing profound needs. Powerful



Fig. 1. The EFT process map: 3 stages, 9 steps, 3 major change events: de-escalation of the negative circularity, the re-engagement of the partner that uses withdrawing as the main strategy to cope with disconnection and then softening the partner that uses pursuing as the main strategy to cope with disconnection (adapted from Wooley and Johnson, 2005)

bonding moments are created each time partners take small risks to share and ask for their needs to be met.

The final stage is meant to consolidate the results of the new, corrective emotional experiences. Partners have now new working models regarding themselves and the others that can help them to better cope with adversity. Conflicts will still arise, problems will still be defined, but the partners are better equipped to support each other in the process.

Table 1. EFT tasks and specific interventions

TASKS	SPECIFIC INTERVENTIONS
Creating and maintaining the therapeutic alliance	Empathetic attunement
Task I: Accessing, modelling and extending emotions (emotional processing)	Reflecting emotional experience Validation Evocative responses Heightening Empathetic conjecture
Task II: New interactions (emotional restructuring)	Tracking, reflecting and reenacting patterns Reframing in terms of negative cycle and attachment processes Restructuring and modelling new interaction patterns

All the above described steps can be accomplished using a certain toolbox; it is beyond the scope and lengths of this article to introduce them extensively, but since we will refer to some of them later, we list them in table 1.

#### IV. Case illustrations

##### A. The algorithm as an expression of the need to be together

Metaphors are, regardless the therapeutic approach, a powerful tool conveying profound messages from the inner worlds of the clients. The final goal of the therapist is to understand as well as possible these metaphors, to apply some structure and give the client back a consistent view of the problem/ world/ self-portrait, etc. The difference in the approaches lies finally in the frame that the therapists use to decipher these “encoded messages”; help comes from the best/ correct understanding (you can help better/ more if you understand correctly) – first, because we all need to fell understood, but more than that, because clients need to see beyond the hidden messages, the needs and longings they have lost contact with or maybe have never been in contact with as they were not even made possible to acknowledge.

Considering the above theoretical landmarks, we analyze in the following pages the excerpts from different EFT sessions; specific techniques will be marked, but the overall goal is to notice the flow of the session once the attachment lens is used and the attachment significance signals the client: **“I am here**

**with you, I get your pain and I am willing to explore with you the underlying emotions – it is dark and dangerous, but together we can unwrap this”.**

The first excerpt is part of session 18 in the EFT process of a married couple; both partners are over 35 years old, benefit from high education, they both work, they have one child and a second one to be born. They have been married for 3 years and, when addressing therapy, the problem was formulated in terms of frequent, highly tensioned conflicts that consumed them both. The cycle revealed a **strident pursuing wife**, who copes with disconnection mainly by critiquing and aggressively trying to control their interactions, while being driven by the excruciating *fear of abandonment*, and a **withdrawing husband**, who prefers to “get lost in his own self” when the pressure of not being good enough overwhelms him, therefore driven by the *fear of not being accepted for what he is*.

At the point of the current session, the couple is considerably de-escalated and can explore deeper feelings; the husband is the visual type of avoidant, a philosophy lover, and he finds it very easy to describe what he feels by reference to different images/metaphors and concepts. We proceed to analyze the excerpt and point to the turns the session took as the attachment significance was considered.

*Therapist: Help me please understand what has just happen right now. What troubles you when looking at her?*

*Him: That she is not getting my **algorithm**.*

*Therapist: Your algorithm, right... [reflection] And how is this for you – that she does not get it?*

*Him: Well... What should I say now? The word that comes to my mind is ... disappointment... But it is not disappointment. It is so... like a **hollow** that fills me... just like that... and I'm permanently searching a way to energize myself with something positive, in all I do... I mean... in all I do...*

*Therapist: So you do this in order to protect yourself from the sensation of being hollow **without her**? [attachment significance]*

*Him: This part in the Bible comes to my mind ... not that I want to say so... but it is a part that has left a mark on me... At this point when Jesus was going through his pilgrimages and there was a female who touched him. She had this physiological problem... and at that moment, despite the many hands that had touched him, he said “Who was the one that just touched me?”... As if there was this vacuum of energy and the moment he was touched, it sucked so much*

*energy. I was distributing this energy and giving to everyone, small bites and you came to take it all...*

*Therapist: Yeah... dividing it with all I love... [attachment significance]*

*Him: Yeah... The same thing happens to me too... I am trying to focus or I am trying to get my energy from these other things around me, but my wife has this reaction, as if she slaps me and she removes any type of equilibrium I made... as much as I tried to make it...*

*Therapist: This is a way of putting it that can sound really negative, when in fact, from my point of view, if we reformulate a bit, it sounds extremely **sad**...*

**[empathic conjecture]**

*Him: ...I do not want to think about being sad... you see... you come again to these words... where... you do not turn me on the good side... [client rejects the proposed emotion – it is too soon to allow himself to feel sad]*

*Therapist: The good part or the part where you want to be?*

*Him: The one where... I would lie to receive that pair of slaps... but to be in the right direction. I mean that I get also channeled in the right direction... It is not something... it's just your desire... without your **caring about me**... I mean... I go saying... My heart hurts... and you go saying, slap-slap, stop drinking coffee, and ok, tomorrow I won't drink any coffee, but let me see that my heart does not ache anymore... but no, you go and say “Stop drinking coffee cause it is not good for you”... and I, on the other hand, I should go...*

*Therapist: Mhm... wait a bit, because I am not sure I got it right...*

*Him: Yeah, I have not really formulated it... it was spontaneous...*

*Therapist: Because... you know what... if I turn back just an idea to process further... what I am hearing is that I am looking for all these modalities, you call them – sources of positive energization...*

*Him: Yeah...*

*Therapist: I would call them ways through which I can forget, or I can make it hurt me less **that I am not connected to you** [attachment significance] and I am piling up all these resources from outside... and I do this, how should I call it... this deposit of energy to use to manage it...*

*And then it is so easy and so simple to see you in a single way... sad, pouting... So that it sucks all the energy out of me and it brings me again, drained of ability. Extremely vulnerable, this is the word that comes to me, very easily... activated, how should I say,*

*easy to be pumped by the “springs from my box” [reference to another metaphor he used in order to express being alert not to hurt her] and very sad that in fact I cannot be connected to you... [attachment significance in proxy voice]*

Him: *Yes... you so got it!*

The algorithm, as an expression of his need to be with her, could not be deciphered as such if the therapist had not held a curious and empathic stance; the slow and soft rhythm of the EFT session is mandatory for clients to move from a strictly cognitive processing of the experience to a deeper, more bodily connected processing of the emotions that are triggered. The sadness triggered in the male client above the hollow sensations, but he was not ready to face and take it in and therefore it was easier for him to turn to another story-metaphor (the biblical encounter of Jesus). Keeping the pace with him and heightening the attachment need with the correlated emotion by referencing to the story, creates for him a different emotional experience. The therapist is willing to explore his “complicated” inner world and can accept his words/stories as meaningful and relevant. The wife also models, as an observer, a different behavior – it is common for her to reject such discussions as they are confusing and difficult to follow and seem to disconnect them more. But for her to hear, right there, in the process of the session, that he is trying to express his strong need of her, is a corrective emotional experience as well.

Applying the attachment lens can serve two major goals: it helps the therapist better understand the inner struggle of the client, and then offer a reflection back to the couple that takes content away and focuses on the emotion and the underlining attachment need. As pointed out, the instilling of the attachment significance must be a diligent, slow and repetitive process; clients may not take in the first interpretations as the negative cycle unwinds and reactivity blocks a positive reframe. Once the EFT therapist holds into his/ her mind the acknowledgement that emotions are difficult to distill, and related attachment needs are signals of deep layers of fear and pain, he or she will naturally keep on trying to instill the attachment reframe until the client is safe to receive it. EFT therapists are temporary safe bases for the clients; they soothe the client’s brain for them to feel secure to explore deeper their inner worlds.

Partially disconnected from the partner, the client is in great danger and feels at risk to share his need of her. The algorithm is a safe, coded message than he can easily risk formulating, waiting to be helped to decode it.

## **B. The algorithm as an expression of the need of predictability**

This second excerpt is part of a live session with the same couple described above; the couple sees a consultant therapist for a single session that happened live in front of therapists learning Emotionally Focused Therapy.

Him: *We men see only a logical part, where things are happening because of an **algorithm**. When this happens, you do this, when that, you do that... You are now unlocking this emotion in me, and that emotion and this... no, a single, straight path... **you do not really see left or right**... [reference to unpredictability]*

Therapist: *Ok, so what you are saying is that if you **had an algorithm** you would know what to do... [reflection]*

Him: *Yeah... right!*

Therapist: *And sometimes this changes and it becomes a bit confusing when this algorithm changes, right? [empathic conjecture]*

Him: *Yeah, exactly, because you see the direct path, like a highway... you can see the asphalt... but if you turn right... then...*

Therapist: *You no longer see the path...*

Him: *Isn't it so? You do not see it as clearly defined... and then it happens that other stuff appears... I could not call it **fear**... [too early to own the emotion]*

Therapist: *Maybe confusion...*

Him: *Yeah... Normally you are... how should I say it... The moment you turned right... you start thinking “How will I survive it? How will I handle it?”, you formulate all these questions but regarding yourself... “How will you refer to the new state?” [clear reference to fear of unpredictability]*

Therapist: *You know what I would like you to help me with? What does it mean for you that “you turn right”? What does this mean in your relationship? When do you “turn right” and end up on this terrain of “how will I survive?” [bringing the client to present process]*

Him: *Right now, I turned right...*

Therapist: *Aha, this is it, turning right... So turning right to this terrain of confusion is when you receive from your wife the signal that you are not doing the things you should do.... [attachment significance]*

Him: *Yeah...*

Therapist: *Even if, from your point of view, you are doing right, as it is according to the **algorithm**...*



Him: Yeah... It is as if she does not take into consideration my emotion... meaning... the one where I am trying to show what I am really... not what it should... what is defining for me as a human being... you simply somehow feel that somebody is trying to change you at this moment when... you know how it is... you are already old... [old saying] "the old horse can no longer be taught"...

Therapist: Mhm... so the same, you would like her to take into consideration your emotion as well... that you can also be yourself... which is natural to me... [validation]

H: Yeah... This is what stands in our way... and we enter the spiral... [code name for their negative cycle]

This time the algorithm speaks more of the need to have a clear, predictable way of interaction and it becomes clearer once the client used also the visual reference of the straight path that he can be safe to follow. The excerpt is especially interesting in terms of the inner circularity of the client – the therapist seizes the fear and tries to slowly approach it; the client himself is aware of it, but only naming it, raises the panic of having to face it and he steps back, apparently diminishing it by rephrasing it in terms of questions "Will I...?", "How will I...?" It is now up to the therapist to calm the nervous system of the client so that he can stay in the present process with the fear and keep a working distance – meaning that he can still explore, without being overwhelmed by the fear and thus numbing himself not to feel it anymore. The window of tolerance is specific to each client and its limits are of course correlated with the emotion being in discussion, but the strategy remains the same: instilling the attachment significance validates the emotion, it gives meaning to it and makes it only natural to exist, thus allowing the client to feel normal for being and acting as he does. The confusion diminishes, and the client can face his "weird" algorithm. It is safe to explore it and to see its links with the negative cycle both partners get trapped in.

### C. The menace of the falling rock – unpredictability and isolation altogether

The third excerpt is also part of a live session with a younger couple; the partners are both under 25 years old, benefited from high education, both work, they do not have children. They have been together for 7 years; this was the first romantic relationship for both; when addressing therapy, the problem was formulated in terms of conflicts regarding wounds from

the past. The cycle revealed a **strident pursuing female partner**, who copes with disconnection mainly by critiquing and aggressively trying to control all possible actions, while being driven by the excruciating fear of abandonment, and a **withdrawing male** who prefers to step back when the pressure of being a disappointment sets in, therefore driven by the fear of not being accepted for what he is. The female partner has a traumatic attachment history; her father is a domestic abuser - both mother and all 3 children are victims, which, in turn, leads the mother to be emotionally absent and abusive just like the father.

At the point of the current session, the couple is considerably de-escalated and can explore deeper feelings; they are coming to the live session after a 2.5 month break in therapy due to holidays and they report having kept a steady relationship in between. We proceed to analyze the excerpt and point the turns the session took as the attachment significance was considered.

Therapist: Ok, I would like us to stop a bit, if you want, there where you said... "When I hear her inviting me to discussions, there is something happening inside of me... I feel that something is not ok..."

Do you know how it is? When you feel this: "Oops... I am in danger, the relationship is in danger"... as I wrote down, you said... "I am not withdrawing for myself, but for us..." [attachment significance]

Him: ...to explain it so... I hope that it is understandable for everybody...

Therapist: I will try to understand... if not, I will let you know...

Him: I am the type of person who puts things more in picture form... to make it easy to understand...

In those moments... to say so, it is as if... we were... me and my lover, somewhere down... on a platform... and somewhere above, there is this **huge rock**... and I see it rolling and rolling and when it gets close to the border... I do not know... I feel like I must make a choice...

Either I protect myself, I go away... and I wait to see what happens... Or I take her and we both run from it... I wait to see what happens... Or I push her aside... and I stay...

Therapist: And you take the rock?

Him: And I take the rock...

Therapist: You are really a guy who paints his with his words and you managed to... transmit very, very much...

Him: And it is only now that the interesting thing appears... that, unfortunately, most of the times I chose to run away... and to leave her to take the rock... but... [tears in the eyes, head down]

Therapist: And this gives you a lot of pain, right? [empathic conjecture]

Him: [silent, fighting with tears, head down...]

Therapist: I would like to stay with this point where you said... that the two of you are on a platform, low, you even showed it to me... and above us there this big rock coming, it will crush us... and it will crush our relationship... [attachment significance] and I see that you feel it... it is as a sensation in all your body... somehow, I felt that all your fibers could sense it... this danger state... and this is very difficult for you... it appears almost as a panic... [empathic conjecture]

Him: Yeah...

Therapist: I do not know... I am thinking... if I were somewhere and I saw this big rock coming my way.... or?

Him: For me, the fact that I need to realize that most of the times I have left her there alone seems harder...

Therapist: Mhm... this is the thought that pressures you the most... "When there was danger, I ran... and I left her... and for that I feel guilty..."

Him: [head down...] Exactly...

Therapist: And this pains you very much... I can see that it provokes a lot of pain...

The moment that this pain appears... is there something else... In terms of... is there a fear of what could happen...?

Him: Yeah, it is the fear of... although, fortunately, I have learnt that... I have learnt not to run away all the times, as I did before... there is this fear of forgetting this... and I would keep on running... maybe because of the habit...

Therapist: I am afraid that... next time... I do not want to... because of my fear, because of this feeling of danger that is deep, I might react again – and to protect myself I might leave her alone again... because I do not want to leave her alone anymore... [reflect, attachment significance]

Yeah... mhm... I want to stay and hold her hand... yeah... Is this your biggest fear... that you will leave her alone?

Him: As I did the past times... so many times...

Therapist: So many times, mhm... and I see that this affects you the most... because you do not want to lose her... [attachment significance]

Him: Exactly...

Therapist: Because, as I know a bit from your history, I do know... I just suppose, I might be wrong... but if you let her alone again, what could happen?

Him: I leave myself alone... [isolated, in despair]

The powerful image that this client uses to put into words the mixture of feelings he faces when being next to his loved one is without doubt touching. The example is yet another proof of the metaphoric nature of humankind and the easiness to express such heavy feelings in images. The client dwells with fear and guilt the very minute that he turns and sees his girlfriend's worried face. They both have past attachment histories that implied facing danger alone; "being on the platform", in front of the menace, it is something they are almost "naturally used to". But the relationship they have built proves that they can also fight the menace together, the fear is smaller when holding hands. So, when the old mechanism, the surviving one, pushes the male partner to fleeing, the guilt comes in – he can forget to save the relationship and naturally go back to saving himself. As such, the mission of the therapist is, again, to contain the emotion so that the client can remain in his window of tolerance and be able to explore it further. The technique is the same: instilling the attachment significance validates the emotions, it gives meaning to both fear and guilt, it speaks about the pain derived and makes it only natural to exist, thus allowing the client to feel normal for being and acting as he does.

## V. Conclusions

As previously pointed out, the universality of the emotional expression is beyond doubts and it is checked as such within the Romanian context (Herb et al, 2015). Each of the excerpts can be further discussed and analyzed, different methods can be pictured, and they could bring different results. The goal here was not to go through all possible scenarios, but to illustrate the profound humanistic, non-judicative turn that the session can take once the attachment frame validates the inner struggle of the client.

The three excerpts that were chosen to be discussed were purposely depicting the interventions when working with male partners thus contributing to the message that men come to therapy, they do explore their emotions and struggle with their inner circularities that might block them when facing emotions. References to complicated images, stories or philosophical concepts are part of the withdrawing

strategy, suppressing emotions, overregulating the attachment system. But it is up to the therapist to connect this “complicated” maze to the universal truth. Attachment needs are universal and so is the pain of not having them met by the close, significant ones. The signals of the attachment system take various forms and metaphors are elegant carriers of these signals, a veritable joy to be with, once, as a therapist, you remain curious and emphatically engaged. In one way or another, these metaphors speak of the same experiences we are all facing: our social brain needs others to calm down, needs to be able to predict as much as possible what is out there and what could endanger it and its relations; when in isolation, the brain slowly “destroys” itself. We need to be in stable, secure relationships to survive and we will protest with all “weapons” available when we cannot reach our safe base. If, as therapists, we keep attachment into mind, nothing is too strange, without meaning or goal.

Finally, “the strongest among us are those that can reach for others” (Susan Johnson).

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