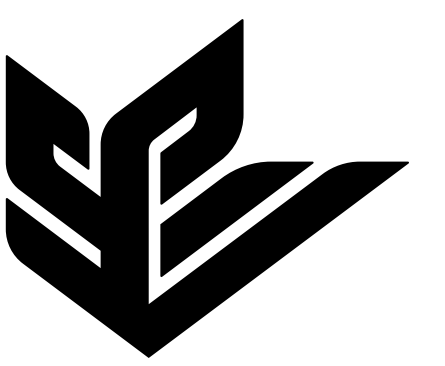


Exploring the impact of the blamer-softening change event in Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy on partners' self-esteem



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ABSTRACT

It is no question that positive romantic relationships are connected to deep feelings of belonging, life satisfaction and positive self-esteem in individuals. However, throughout the course of the relationship, individuals can experience depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms and negative affect. A significant marker of progress for couples in Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy is the presence of the blamer-softening change event. This event can help alleviate some of the negative symptoms partners experience. Given the well-accepted and understood importance of self-esteem on one's overall mental health, this study seeks to understand the impact of the blamer-softening change event on each partner's self-esteem.

INTRODUCTION

- Positive romantic relationships has been shown to offer a sense of belonging, life satisfaction and positive self-esteem in individuals. They have also been associated with feelings of depression, anxiety and negative affect, which are linked to low self esteem.
- Research has shown a correlation with low self-esteem and multiple psychiatric disorders, such as depression, social anxiety, eating disorders and substance use (Vohs et al., 1999; Donnelly et al., 2008; Sowislo and Orth, 2013). Multiple meta-analyses have also supported that positive self-esteem is associated with good mental health and overall well-being (Zell & Johansson, 2014).
- In Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy, an empirically backed couples therapy treatment model, romantic couples become stuck in a blamer-withdrawer interactional cycle (Johnson, 2004).
- The blamer-softening change event is a moment in which the blaming partner shows vulnerability by expressing their desire for connection and security rather than through hostility and criticalness, a key indicator of growth and progress in EFCT (Moser et al., 2017).
- EFCT research has focused largely on relationship satisfaction, connection and attachment in couples; however, individual self-esteem is an important variable to consider in the relationship dynamic as it heavily influences the overall well-being of each individual and therefore, the relationship as a whole.

PRIMARY AIM AND HYPOTHESES

Research Question: What is the impact of the blamer-softening change event on a romantic couple, specifically on each partner's self esteem?

Hypothesis: The withdrawing partner will show improved self-esteem after the blamer-softening change event while the blaming partner will experience the same levels of self-esteem.

METHODS

Participants

- 20 couples between the ages of 25-65 will be recruited from the King County area
- Eligibility criteria:** Couples must indicate that they are in a long term committed relationship (minimum length: 1 year), have an absence of Intimate Partner Violence, not be at risk for substance abuse and show at least a moderate level of relationship distress on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale

Procedures

- All couples will be placed in the EFT treatment group, in which they will receive EFT-focused therapy once per week for 12-20 weeks (the longevity of treatment will be based on how quickly the couple experiences the blamer-softening change event).
- After each session, the couples will be required to provide a **session rating** - the ratings will be based on the level of positive change. Couples will also be required to complete the **Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale**.
- 6 weeks after the final therapy session, couples will join for a follow-up appointment, where they will complete the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale for the final time.

MEASURES

- To determine the existence of the blamer-softening event, the researchers will utilize the therapist's notes and corroborate it with the clients' session rating. In order to further corroborate the existence of a blamer-softening event, the researchers will code a 10-minute segment of the session using the **Structural Analysis of Social Behavior (SASB)** and the **Experiencing Scale (ES)**.
- To measure each individual's self-esteem level after each session, the participants will complete the **Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale** after every session. Participants will also complete the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale 6 weeks after their final therapy session.

RESULTS

RQ: What is the impact of the blamer-softening change event on a romantic couple, specifically on each partner's self esteem?

The ANOVA test will be used to compare the difference in self esteem levels at multiple time points - at baseline/pre-treatment, after the blamer softening change event, and at the 6-week follow up. The ANOVA test was chosen as there are multiple measurements for the same subjects to assess for statistically significant changes in self-esteem levels, especially from pre and post treatment.

Discussion

Social Implications:

If the presence of a blamer-softening change event positively influences one or both partners' self esteem, then this change may likely result in multiple social implications, including improved mental health for individuals in relationships, greater satisfaction in relationships, decreased likelihood of separations or divorces, greater family stability, and reduction in depression or anxiety for individuals.

Clinical Implications:

This study emphasizes one foundational goal of Emotionally Focused Therapy, which is to soften the blamer in a couple dynamic. The clinical implications of this research would be profound. Clinicians may be encouraged to provide more targeted interventions that specifically emphasize the blamer softening event due to its widespread benefits not only on relationship dynamics but also on improving individual well-being. Positive findings on aspects of EFT will also provide continued empirical support for EFT as an evidence-based practice for couples therapy.

Future Research:

To expand on the current findings, future research can look into the impact of improved self-esteem on the couple dynamic. It may be eye-opening to further study how improved self-esteem from a relational change, such as the blamer softening change event, compared to improved self-esteem from a non-relational or individual change, such as a new job or personal achievement, influences a couple's dynamic.