Attachment Theory
Why Bother with Theory?

• “He who loves practice without theory is like the sailor who boards ship without a rudder and compass and never knows where he may cast.” – Leonardo da Vinci

• “There is nothing as practical as a good theory.”
  – Kurt Lewin

• “There is no question of theory versus practice but rather of intelligent practice versus uninformed, stupid practice.”
  – John Dewey
Psychological Theory – 5 Waves

**First Wave**: Psychodynamic theories (Adlerian, psychoanalytic)

**Second Wave**: Learning theories (behavioral, cognitive-behavioral)

**Third Wave**: Humanistic theories (person-centered, gestalt)

**Fourth Wave**: Feminist & Multicultural theories

**Fifth Wave**: Postmodern & Constructivist theories
Secure Love

• At the core of happy relationships is a deep trust that partners matter to each other and will reliably respond when needed. Secure love is an open channel for reciprocal emotional signaling. Love is a constant process of tuning in, connecting, missing and misreading cues, disconnecting, repairing, and finding deeper connection. It is a dance of meeting and parting and finding each other again, minute by minute and day by day.
True meaning of couple conflict

- Distressed partners no longer see each other as their emotional safe haven. Our lover is supposed to be the one person we can count on who will always respond. Instead, unhappy partners feel emotionally deprived, rejected, even abandoned. In that light, couples’ conflicts assume their true meaning: They are frightened protests against eroding connection and a demand for emotional reengagement.
Looking in the wrong direction

• For years therapists and mental health professionals had focused their attention on the individual, believing that any turmoil could be traced back to a person’s own troubled psyche. Fix that and the relationship would improve. But that wasn’t what was happening.

• Therapists realized that concentrating on one person didn’t give a complete picture. People in love relationships, just as in all relationships, are not distinct entities, acting independently; they are part of a dynamic dyad, within which each person’s actions spark and fuel reactions in the other. It was the couple and how the individuals “danced” together that needed to be understood and changed, not simply the individual alone.
Fixes that fail

• The fixes we’ve tried in the past have been failures because we have not understood the basis of love.

• Couples dig back and sift through their childhood experiences to find the reasons why they respond the way they do. This seeking after insight into first relationships is laborious, time consuming, and expensive—with small benefit. It comes at the problem sideways, through intellectual insight into each person’s relationship history. Your present relationship is not just your past automatically playing out; this dismisses your partner and the power of his or her responses, as if this partner were simply a blank screen on which you project the movie of your past.

• Ultimately, these remedies are ineffectual because they don’t address the source of relationship distress: the fear that emotional connection—the font of all comfort and respite—is vanishing.
A New Perspective

• The first and foremost instinct of humans is neither sex nor aggression. It is to seek contact and comforting connection.

• Adult romantic love is an attachment bond, just like the one between mother and child.

• Hot sex doesn’t lead to secure love; rather, secure attachment leads to hot sex—and also to love that lasts. Monogamy is not a myth.

• Emotional dependency is not immature or pathological; it is our greatest strength.

• Being the “best you can be” is really only possible when you are deeply connected to another. Splendid isolation is for planets, not people.

• We are not created selfish; we are designed to be empathetic. Our innate tendency is to feel with and for others.

Sue Johnson
Love Sense
John Bowlby (1907-1990)

- Bowlby rebelled against the professional dictum that the crux of patients’ problems lay in their internal conflicts and unconscious fantasies. Bowlby insisted the problems were mostly external, rooted in real relationships with real people.
- Bowlby’s theory was radical and noisily rejected.
- Attachment theory, at first ridiculed and despised, eventually revolutionized child-rearing methods in North America.

“\textit{A rebel who changed the landscape of love.}”

Sue Johnson
\textit{Hold Me Tight}
Beyond Childhood

• Bowlby maintained that the need to be close to a few precious others, to attach, persists through life and is the force that shapes our adult love relationships.

• In the two decades since Bowlby’s death (1990), hundreds of studies have been published bearing out his assertions. They confirm that our need to attach continues beyond childhood and also establish that romantic love is an attachment bond. At every age, human beings habitually seek and maintain physical and emotional closeness with at least one particular irreplaceable other. We especially seek out this person when we feel stressed, unsure, or anxious.

• The fact that this perspective on adult love was, at first, summarily rejected by many psychologists and mental health professionals is not surprising. For one thing, it challenges a cherished belief about ourselves as adults; specifically, that we are self-sufficient entities.
Counter-Cultural

• The attachment view of love was, and perhaps still is, radically out of line with our culture’s established social and psychological ideas of adulthood: that maturity means being independent and self-sufficient. The notion of the invulnerable warrior who faces life and danger alone is long ingrained in our culture. Consider James Bond, the iconic impervious man, still going strong after four decades. Psychologists use words like *undifferentiated, codependent, symbiotic,* or even *fused* to describe people who seem unable to be self-sufficient or definitively assert themselves with others. In contrast, Bowlby talked about “effective dependency” and how being able, from “the cradle to the grave,” to turn to others for emotional support is a sign and source of strength.
Health & Wellbeing

• In the death camps of World War II, the unit of survival was the pair, not the solitary individual.

• Having close ties with others is vital to every aspect of our health—mental, emotional, and physical.

• Rejection and exclusion trigger the same circuits in the same part of the brain, the anterior cingulate, as physical pain. In fact, this part of the brain turns on anytime we are emotionally separated from those who are close to us.

• Isolation is inherently traumatizing for human beings.

Sue Johnson
Hold Me Tight
Not a flaw or weakness

• Those of us who flourish, even when living alone, invariably have a rich internal world populated by images of loving attachment figures. To be human is to need others, and this is no flaw or weakness.

• As adults, the need for another’s tangible presence is less absolute than is a child’s. We can use mental images of our partner to call up a sense of connection. Thus if we are upset, we can remind ourselves that our partner loves us and imagine him or her reassuring and comforting us. (A technique that Israeli prisoners of war have used.)
Emotion

• *Emotion* comes from a Latin word *emovere*, to move.
• We are “moved” when those we love show their deeper feelings to us.
• If partners were to reconnect, they indeed had to let their emotions move them into new ways of responding to each other.

Sue Johnson
*Hold Me Tight*
Below the waterline of the iceberg

- We have to dive below to discover the basic problem: these couples have disconnected emotionally; they don’t feel emotionally safe with each other. What couples and therapists too often do not see is that most fights are really *protests* over emotional disconnection. Underneath all the distress, partners are asking each other: *Can I count on you, depend on you? Are you there for me? Will you respond to me when I need, when I call? Do I matter to you? AM I valued and accepted by you? Do you need me, rely on me?* The anger, the criticism, the demands, are really cries to their lovers, calls to stir their hearts, to draw their mates back in emotionally and reestablish a sense of safe connection.

Sue Johnson
*Hold Me Tight*
Secure & Insecure Attachment

• A person’s basic attachment style is formed in childhood.
• Automatically turn on when we (or our partners) need connection.
• Although we have a main attachment style, we can—and do—step into alternative strategies at specific times and with specific people.
Secure Attachment

• Develops naturally when we grow up knowing that we can count on our main caregiver to be accessible and responsive to us. We learn to reach for closeness when we need it, trusting that we will be offered comfort and caring much of the time. This loving contact is a touchstone, helping us to calm ourselves and find our emotional balance.

• We feel comfortable with closeness and needing others and aren’t consumed by worry that we will be betrayed or abandoned.

• Our behavior says in essence, “I know I need you and you need me. And that’s okay. In fact, it’s great. So let’s reach out to each other and get close.”

• Secure people see themselves as generally competent and worthy of love, and they see others as trustworthy and reliable. They tend to view their relationships as workable and are open to learning about love and loving.

Sue Johnson
Love Sense
Anxious style

• Emotions are ramped up.

• We are inclined to worry that we will be abandoned, and so we habitually seek closeness and ask for proof that we are loved.

• It’s as if we are saying, “Are you there? Are you? Show me. I can’t be sure. Show me again.”

• Tend to idealize others but have strong doubts as to their own value and their basic acceptability as partners. As a result, they obsessively seek approval and the reassurance that they are indeed lovable and not about to be rejected.

• In their stories and dreams portray themselves as apprehensive and unloved.
Avoidant Style

• Tend to tamp down our emotions so as to protect ourselves from being vulnerable to, or dependent on, others.

• We shut down our attachment longings and try to evade real connection.

• We are apt to see other people as a source of danger, not safety or comfort.

• Our attitude seems to be “I don’t need you to be there for me. I’m fine whatever you do.”

• View themselves as worthy of love—at least that is their conscious stance. Any self-doubt tends to be suppressed. They have a negative view of others as inherently unreliable and untrustworthy.

• In their stories and dreams see themselves as distant and unfeeling.

Sue Johnson
Love Sense
Disorganized Style

• Caregivers present double-binding messages to children. Sometimes called “paradoxical injunction,” e.g. “Come here, go away.”

• Parents create situations for the child that are unsolvable and un-win-able.

• Interactions that are frightening, disorienting, inherently disorganizing and which sometimes involve violence. The parents become the source of fear.

• Arises in the child when there is a desire to be close to the parent as an object of safety conflicting with a drive to detach from a dangerous and confusing caregiver.

• For an adult this may mean being held emotionally hostage by the conflict of the desire for intimacy as well as the fear of it.
External threat vs. Internal conflict

• Secure and anxiously attached people tend to reach for those they love for comfort while avoidant people tend to withdraw. (when the threat comes from outside the relationship)

• Both secure and avoidant people can stay on topic and keep their emotions in check while discussing internal conflicts.

• In the face of internal conflict, anxious partners do not reach out; they go completely off the rails. They catastrophize, bring in irrelevant issues and become angry and confrontational, even when their partner refrains from being reciprocally hostile. Anxious partners are generally uneasy about their lover’s commitment to begin with and thus are primed to view anything he or she says or does more negatively. Haunted by the specter of abandonment, they try to control their lover.

Sue Johnson
Love Sense
Four steps of Separation Distress

• Anger and protest
• Clinging and seeking
• Depression and despair
  • Beginning to let go of their longing for connection and move into grieving
• Detachment
  • Stops investing in the relationship and decides just to let it die.
Primal Panic

• Mammals have special pathways in their brains dedicated to registering the “primal panic” that results from the lose, even if only momentary, of an attachment figure.

• This panic is precipitated by any threat of rejection or abandonment.
Repair

• To repair a bond and shape a safe-haven relationship, we have to do more than simply stop creating distance. We have to do what securely attached dyads do naturally: we have to learn to turn toward each other and reveal our fears and longings. This is, admittedly, hard to do, particularly if we are ashamed or don’t have the words to express our needs.
Emotion

• A radical new view of emotion and its role in love relationships has been emerging. In the past two decades, nearly every “fact” about emotion that was drummed into my head in grad school has been repudiated.

• We are designed to deal with emotion in concert with another person—not by ourselves.

• Love relationships aren’t meant only to be joyrides; they’re also restorative and balancing meeting places where negative emotions are calmed and regulated.

• Our hearts and brains are set up to use our partners to help us find our balance in the midst of distress and fear. If they instead become a source of distress, then we are doubly bereft and vulnerable.

• Loving connection is the natural antidote to fear and pain.

Sue Johnson
Love Sense
Six innate and universal emotions

• Fear
• Anger
• Happiness or joy
• Sadness
• Surprise
• Shame
• Learning to love and be loved is, in effect, about learning to tune in to our emotions so that we know what we need from a partner and expressing those desires openly, in a way that evokes sympathy and support from him or her. When this support helps us balance our emotions—staying in touch with but not being flooded by them—we can then tune in to and sensitively respond to our partner in return.
Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFT)

• The message of EFT is simple: Forget about learning how to argue better, analyzing your early childhood, making grand romantic gestures, or experimenting with new sexual positions. Instead, recognize and admit that you are emotionally attached to and dependent on your partner in much the same way that a child is on a parent for nurturing, soothing, and protection. Adult attachments may be more reciprocal and less centered on physical contact, but the nature of the emotional bond is the same.
Hold Me Tight

• Designed to be used by all couples, all cultures

• Not for people who are in abusive or violent relationships, nor for those with serious addictions or in long-term affairs. Such activities undermine the ability to positively engage with partners. In those instances, a therapist is the best resource.
Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFT)

• Conversation 1 — Recognizing the Demon Dialogues
  • Find the Bad Guy
  • Protest Polka (aka Demand-Withdraw or Criticize-Defend)
  • Freeze and Flee (Withdraw-Withdraw)

• Conversation 2 — Finding the Raw Spots

• Conversation 3 – Revisiting a Rocky Moment

• Conversation 4 — Hold Me Tight — Engaging and Connecting

• Conversation 5 — Forgiving Injuries

• Conversation 6 — Bonding through Sex and Touch

• Conversation 7 — Keeping Your Love Alive

Sue Johnson

Hold Me Tight
Demand-Withdraw

• We can come up with may techniques to address different aspects of couples’ distress, but until we understand the core principles that organize love relationships, we cannot really understand love’s problems or offer couples enduring help. The demand-withdraw pattern is not just a bad habit, it reflects a deeper underlying reality: such couples are starving emotionally. They are losing the source of their emotional sustenance. They feel deprived.

• Until we address the fundamental need for connection and the fear of losing it, the standard techniques, such as learning problem-solving or communication skills, examining childhood hurts, or taking time outs, are misguided and ineffectual.

Sue Johnson
*Hold Me Tight*
Demand Withdraw (continued)

• The idea that these demand-distance spirals are all about attachment panic is still revolutionary to many psychologists and counselors.

• The standard remedies do not address yearnings for or threats to safe emotional connection. They do not tell couples how to reconnect or how to stay connected. The techniques they are taught may interrupt a fight, but at a terrible cost. They often further the distance between partners, reinforcing fears of being rejected and abandoned just when couples need to reaffirm their bond.
Partners Caught in Demon Dialogues

• Need to speak the language of attachment

• A desperate need for an emotional response that ends in blaming and a desperate fear of rejection and loss that ends in withdrawal—this was the scaffolding underneath these endless conflicts.
Emotional Responsiveness: A.R.E.

• Accessibility: Can I reach you?
  • This means staying open to your partner even when you have doubts and feel insecure.

• Responsiveness: Can I rely on you to respond to me emotionally?
  • This means tuning in to your partner and showing that his or her emotions, especially attachment needs and fears, have an impact on you. It means accepting and placing a priority on the emotional signals your partner conveys and sending clear signals of comfort and caring when your partner needs them.

• Engagement: Do I know you will value me and stay close?
  • Emotional engagement here means the very special kind of attention that we give only to a loved one. Being emotionally present.
2 Ways of Protecting Ourselves

• One route is to avoid engagement, that is, to try to numb our emotions, to shut down and deny our attachment needs. The other is to listen to our anxiety and fight for recognition and response.

• Which strategy we adopt when we feel disconnected—becoming demanding and critical or withdrawing and shutting down—partly reflects our natural temperament, but mostly it is dictated by the lessons we learn in the key attachment relationships of our past and present. Moreover, because we learn with every new relationship, our strategy is not fixed. We can be critical in one relationship, and withdraw in another.

Sue Johnson
*Hold Me Tight*
Demon Dialogue #1: Find the Bad Guy

• The purpose of Find the Bad Guy is self-protection, but the main move is mutual attack, accusation, or blame. The starting cue for this pattern of responses is that we are hurt by or feel vulnerable with our partner and become suddenly out of control. Emotional safety is lost.

• It could just as easily be called It’s Not Me, It’s You.

• Once we get caught in a negative pattern, we expect it, watch for it, and react even faster when we think we see it coming.

• We begin to see the relationship as more and more unsatisfying or unsafe and our partner as uncaring or even defective.

• The secret to stopping the dance is to recognize that no one has to be the bad guy. The accuse/accuse pattern itself is the villain here, and the partners are the victims.

Sue Johnson
Hold Me Tight
Demon Dialogue #2: Protest Polka

• The most widespread and ensnaring dance in relationships
• One partner reaches out, albeit in a negative way, and the other steps back, and the pattern repeats.
• One partner is demanding, actively protesting the disconnection; the other is withdrawing, quietly protesting the implied criticism.
• It is all about trying to get a response, a response that connects and reassures.
• Couples have a difficult time recognizing this pattern.
Exiting the Polka

- Being able to recognize and accept protests about separation and exit the Protest Polka is crucial to a healthy relationship. If a safe, loving bond is to stay strong and grow, couples have to be able to repair moments of disconnection and step out of common dead-end ways of dealing with them, ways that actually exacerbate disconnection by destroying trust and safety.
Demon Dialogue #3: Freeze and Flee

• Both partners are shut down into frozen defense and denial. Each is in self-protection mode, trying to act as if he or she does not feel and does not need.

• If this cycle runs its course, the aggressive partner will grieve the relationship and then will detach and leave.

• The extreme distancing of Freeze and Flee is a response to the loss of connection and the sense of helplessness concerning how to restore it.

• No one is reaching for anyone here. No one will take any risks. So there is no dance at all.
Conversation #2: Finding the Raw Spots

• A raw spot is a hypersensitivity formed by moments in a person’s past or current relationships when an attachment need has been repeatedly neglected, ignored, or dismissed, resulting in a person’s feeling emotionally deprived or deserted.

• Frequently arise from wounding relationships with significant people in our past: parents, siblings, past & present lovers.