



Initial Spark of Hope: Considering Attachment First



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Abstract

In a clinical sample of couples, the relationship between a couple's attachment level, the stability of their relationship and the severity of their presenting problems at first session were considered. Attachment scores were divided into tertiles (low, medium and high), and a significant difference was found between the top and bottom tertiles of secure attachment for both genders for 7 of 10 presenting problems' severity and for relationship stability.

Introduction

Initial Sessions are important

- Clients who drop out of therapy during the initial sessions exhibit similar outcomes to those who did not attend therapy at all (Masi, Miller and Olson, 2003).
- Halford et al. (2012) report that the impact (or the lack thereof) of couples therapy on couples during initial sessions (up to the first half of sessions) predicts the overall outcome for that same couple.

Clients expect help with presenting problem

- Couples seek therapy for a variety of reasons (Roddy, Rothman, Cicila, & Doss, 2018; Doss, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004; Miller, Yorgason, Sandberg, & White, 2003)
- Couples seeking therapy report a primary expectation of "work[ing] together to resolve the problems that brought them to therapy" (Tambling, Wong and Anderson, 2014, p. 36)

Attachment's role in couple's relationship

- Secure attachment contributes to relationship quality, stability and satisfaction (Sandberg, Bradford, & Brown, 2017; Simpson, 1987; Fitzpatrick & Sollie, 1999; Sandberg, Novak, Davis, & Busby, 2016)

Attachment's role in therapy

- Facilitating development of specific attachment-based behaviors during therapy sessions positively impacts attachment levels and relationship satisfaction (Sandberg, Bradford, & Brown, 2017)

Research Questions

- 1 - What is the association between initial levels of couple attachment and presenting problem severity?
- 2 - What is the association between initial levels of couple attachment and relationship stability?
- 3 - Do these associations differ by gender?

Results

Findings in the table below suggest a significant difference at first session between the top and bottom tertiles of attachment levels as related to 8 of 10 presenting problems for males and for 7 out of the 10 presenting problems for females.

For both partners, a higher attachment behavior score indicated significantly higher ($p < .001$) relationship stability when comparing upper attachment behavior tertile to the lower tertile at session 1.

Presenting Problem Severity Comparison by Attachment Score at Time 1

Presenting Problem	Female			Male			
	Attachment Tertile		<i>p</i>	Attachment Tertile		<i>p</i>	
Financial Matters	Low	Med	.683	Financial Matters	Low	Med	.663
		High	.018*			High	.094
Communication	Low	Med	.018*	Communication	Low	Med	.041*
		High	.000***			High	.000***
Rearing Children	Low	Med	.009**	Rearing Children	Low	Med	.256
		High	.000***			High	.002**
Intimacy/Sexuality	Low	Med	.347	Intimacy/Sexuality	Low	Med	.069
		High	.001**			High	.001**
Parents/In-Laws	Low	Med	.119	Parents/In-Laws	Low	Med	.834
		High	.162			High	.001**
Roles (who does what)	Low	Med	.347	Roles (who does what)	Low	Med	.730
		High	.000***			High	.000***
Time Spent Together	Low	Med	.591	Time Spent Together	Low	Med	.057
		High	.001**			High	.000***
Time Spent Using Media (e.g. Video Games, TV, Internet)	Low	Med	.715	Time Spent Using Media (e.g. Video Games, TV, Internet)	Low	Med	.066
		High	.019*			High	.000***
Type of Media (e.g. Violent or Sexually Oriented)	Low	Med	.401	Type of Media (e.g. Violent or Sexually Oriented)	Low	Med	.086
		High	.223			High	.004**
Substance/Chemical Use	Low	Med	.611	Substance/Chemical Use	Low	Med	.292
		High	.062			High	.362

* Mean difference is significant at the .05 level ** Mean difference is significant at the .01 level *** Mean difference is significant at the .001 level

Implications

Because the impact of initial sessions is important to overall outcome, our findings suggest that marriage and family therapists may wish to focus a portion of each of the first sessions on building secure attachment. We believe doing so could help inspire hope, increase client attendance and decrease client's perception of the severity of presenting problem.

Additionally, this attachment "tune-up" may help generate greater stability in the relationship, possibly alleviating some relational stress for clients and allowing them to focus more on therapeutic goals and their presenting problem.

Finally, there was little to no difference between males and females in regards to the impact of attachment and outcome variables, suggesting the universality of attachment needs across gender.

Limitations

Clinician's should use caution and discretion in using this approach when working with couples who are highly dysregulated and/or in relationships with high conflict or abuse taking place between partners.

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