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Attachment injuries in couple relationships: A new perspective on impasses in couples therapy

[Journal of Marital and Family Therapy](#) , [Apr 2001](#) by [Johnson, Susan M](#), [Makinen, Judy A](#), [Millikin, John W](#)

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This article identifies and operationalizes the newly defined construct of attachment injury. An attachment injury occurs when one partner violates the expectation that the other will offer comfort and caring in times of danger or distress. This incident becomes a clinically recurring theme and creates an impasse that blocks relationship repair in couples therapy. An attachment injury is characterized by an abandonment or by a betrayal of trust during a critical moment of need. The injurious incident defines the relationship as insecure and maintains relationship distress because it is continually used as a standard for the dependability of the offending partner. The concept of an attachment injury is defined here in the context of emotionally focused therapy, an empirically validated, short-term approach to modifying distress in couples. The broad theoretical underpinnings of this concept may be found in attachment theory as applied to adult romantic relationships. Through the delineation of attachment injury events and the ongoing development of a detailed model of resolution, couples therapists will be better able to identify, describe, and effectively treat such injuries and address the therapeutic impasses that are associated with them.

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Attachment theory, now one of the most promising theories of adult love relationships (Shaver & Hazan, 1993), emphasizes the propensity for human beings to make and maintain powerful affectional bonds to significant others (Bowlby, 1988). Virtually every

aspect of human experience is strongly influenced by the quality of these bonds. In couples, a secure attachment bond is an active, affectionate, reciprocal relationship in which partners mutually derive and provide closeness, comfort, and security. These bonds are not simply based on "reciprocal altruism" but, rather, on a "profound psychological and physiological interdependence" (Hazan & Zeifman, 1999, p. 351). Attachment theorists have pointed out that, perhaps because of this interdependence, incidents in which one partner responds or fails to respond at times of urgent need seem to influence the quality of an attachment relationship disproportionately (Simpson & Rholes, 1994).

Negative attachment-related events, particularly abandonments and betrayals, often cause seemingly irreparable damage to close relationships. Many partners enter therapy not only in general distress but also with the goal of bringing closure to such events, thus restoring lost intimacy and trust. During the therapy process, however, these events, which we have termed attachment injuries, often reemerge in an alive and intensely emotional manner, much like a traumatic flashback, and overwhelm the injured partner. When the other partner then fails to respond in a reparative, reassuring manner, or when the injured spouse cannot accept such reassurance, the injury is compounded. As the couple experiences failure in their attempts to move beyond such injuries and to repair the bond between them, their despair and alienation deepen. So a partner's withdrawal from his wife while she suffers a miscarriage, as well as his subsequent unwillingness to discuss this incident, becomes a recurring focus of the couple's dialogue and blocks the development of new, more positive interactions.

In this article we discuss attachment injury as a construct that may be useful in understanding impasses and repair processes in attachment relationships. In particular, the understanding of the nature of particular impasses in couples therapy increases the likelihood that interventions will result in significant and lasting change, rather than resulting in more temporary and limited improvement as is often now the case (Jacobson & Addis, 1993).

The couples therapy literature has recently attempted to deal with particular kinds of betrayals or relationship traumas that make relationship repair more difficult. There has been much discussion of infidelity, for example, and how to help couples deal with such events (Abrams Spring, 1997). The forgiveness literature is relevant here (Flanigan, 1992; Worthington & DiBlasio, 1990). However, there is little understanding of the negative events that call for forgiveness, and it is often defined as an intrapersonal rather than an interpersonal process. Views of forgiveness have also not been integrated into broader theories of marriage (Coop Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2000). Perhaps as a result of this lack of a broad theoretical framework, there is little consensus as to the critical elements of forgiveness and how and why particular kinds of negative incidents affect relationships in particular ways.

The concept of attachment injury does not focus so much on the specific content of a painful event but on the attachment significance of such events. Some incidents involving some form of infidelity might be experienced as attachment injuries, whereas other incidents would not. The attachment injury concept arises out of a specific theoretical perspective on close relationships. This perspective, apart from its general conceptual

relevance as a theory of adult love and its growing empirical support, also seems to be a particularly appropriate conceptual frame for the events discussed here. Attachment theory has been called a theory of trauma (Atkinson, 1997) in that it emphasizes the extreme emotional adversity of isolation and separation, particularly at times of increased vulnerability. This theoretical framework offers an explanation of why certain events become pivotal in a relationship as well as an understanding of what the key features of such events will be, how they will affect a particular couple's relationship, and how such events can be optimally resolved.

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