


# hold me *tight*



SEVEN CONVERSATIONS  
for a LIFETIME of LOVE

.....  
Dr. Sue Johnson

Developer of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy,  
the most successful approach to building loving relationships

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**ALSO BY DR. SUE JOHNSON**

*The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy: Creating Connection*

*Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy with Trauma Survivors:  
Strengthening Attachment Bonds*

*To my clients and colleagues, who have helped me to understand love.  
To my partner, John, and my children, Tim, Emma, and Sarah, who have  
taught me how to feel it and give it.*

Dance me to your beauty  
with a burning violin  
Dance me through the panic  
till I'm gathered safely in  
Lift me like an olive branch  
and be my homeward dove  
Dance me to the end of love

—LEONARD COHEN

## *Introduction*

I have always been fascinated by relationships. I grew up in Britain, where my dad ran a pub, and I spent a lot of time watching people meeting, talking, drinking, brawling, dancing, flirting. But the focal point of my young life was my parents' marriage. I watched helplessly as they destroyed their marriage and themselves. Still, I knew they loved each other deeply. In my father's last days, he wept raw tears for my mother although they had been separated for more than twenty years.

My response to my parents' pain was to vow never to get married. Romantic love was, I decided, an illusion and a trap. I was better off on my own, free and unfettered. But then, of course, I fell in love and married. Love pulled me in even as I pushed it away.

What was this mysterious and powerful emotion that defeated my parents, complicated my own life, and seemed to be the central source of joy and suffering for so many of us? Was there a way through the maze to enduring love?

I followed my fascination with love and connection into counseling and psychology. As part of my training, I studied this drama as described by poets and scientists. I taught disturbed children who had been denied love. I counseled adults who struggled with the loss of love. I worked with families where family members loved each other, but could not come together and could not live apart. Love remained a mystery.

Then, in the final phase of getting my doctorate in counseling psychology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, I started to work with



couples. I was instantly mesmerized by the intensity of their struggles and the way they often spoke of their relationships in terms of life and death.

I'd enjoyed considerable success treating individuals and families, but counseling two warring partners defeated me. And none of the books in the library or the techniques I was being taught seemed to help. My couples didn't care about insights into their childhood relationships. They didn't want to be reasonable and learn to negotiate. They certainly didn't want to be taught rules for fighting effectively.

Love, it seemed, was all about nonnegotiables. You can't bargain for compassion, for connection. These are not intellectual reactions; they are *emotional* responses. So I started to simply stay with the couples' experiences and let them teach me about the emotional rhythms and patterns in the dance of romantic love. I began to tape my couple sessions and replay them over and over again.

As I watched couples shout and weep, bicker and shut down, I began to understand that there were key negative and positive emotional moments that defined a relationship. With the help of my thesis advisor, Les Greenberg, I started to develop a new couple therapy, one that was based on these moments. We called it Emotionally Focused Therapy, EFT for short.

We ran a research project giving some couples a developing version of EFT; others a behavioral therapy, teaching communication skills and negotiation; and others no therapy at all. The results for EFT were amazingly positive, better than no treatment or the behavioral therapy. Couples fought less, felt closer, and their satisfaction with their relationships soared. The success of this study propelled me to an academic position at the University of Ottawa, where over the years I set up more studies with many different kinds of couples in counselors' offices, training centers, and hospital clinics. The results continued to be astoundingly good.

Despite this success, I realized I still didn't understand the emotional drama that entangled my couples. I was navigating the maze of love, but I hadn't yet reached its heart. I had a thousand questions. Why did the distressed partners in my sessions seethe with such strong emotions? Why

did people struggle so to get a loved one to respond? Why did EFT work, and how could we make it even better?

Then, in the middle of an argument with a colleague in a pub, the place where I first began to learn about human connection, I had one of those flashes of inspiration and understanding we read about. My colleague and I were discussing how so many therapists believe that healthy love relationships are just rational bargains. We are all into getting as many benefits as we can at the smallest possible cost, goes the thinking.

I said that I knew there was a lot more than this going on in my couple sessions. “Okay,” my colleague challenged, “so if love relationships aren’t bargains, what are they?” Then I heard myself say in a casual voice, “Oh, they’re emotional bonds. They’re about the innate need for safe emotional connection. Just like [British psychiatrist] John Bowlby talks about in his attachment theory concerning mothers and kids. The same thing is going on with adults.”

I left that discussion on fire. Suddenly I saw the exquisite logic behind all my couples’ passionate complaints and desperate defensiveness. I knew what they needed, and I understood how EFT transformed relationships. Romantic love was all about attachment and emotional bonding. It was all about our wired-in need to have someone to depend on, a loved one who can offer reliable emotional connection and comfort.

I believed I had discovered, or rediscovered, what love is all about and how we can repair it and make it last. Once I began to use the frame of attachment and bonding, I saw the drama surrounding distressed couples so much more clearly. I also saw my own marriage much more clearly. I understood that in these dramas we are caught up in emotions that are part of a survival program set out by millions of years of evolution. There is no sidestepping these emotions and needs without contorting ourselves all out of shape. I understood that what couple therapy and education had been lacking was a clear scientific view of love.

But when I tried to get my views published, most of my colleagues did not agree at all. First they said that emotion was something that adults should

control. Indeed, that too much emotion was the basic problem in most marriages. It should be overcome, not listened to or indulged. But most important, they argued, healthy adults are self-sufficient. Only dysfunctional people need or depend on others. We had names for these people: they were *enmeshed*, *codependent*, *merged*, *fused*. In other words, they were messed up. Spouses depending on each other too much was what wrecked marriages!

Therapists, my colleagues pronounced, should encourage people to stand on their own two feet. This was just like Dr. Spock's advice on how parents should handle their youngsters — picking up a crying child is the way to create a weakling, he warned. Trouble is, Dr. Spock was dead wrong when it came to kids. And so were my colleagues when it comes to adults.

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. EFT focuses on creating and strengthening this emotional bond between partners by identifying and transforming the key moments that foster an adult loving relationship: being open, attuned, and responsive to each other.

Today EFT is revolutionizing couple therapy. Rigorous studies during the past fifteen years have shown that 70 to 75 percent of couples who go through EFT recover from distress and are happy in their relationships. The results appear lasting, even with couples who are at high risk for divorce. EFT has been recognized by the American Psychological Association as an empirically proven form of couple therapy.

There are thousands of EFT-trained therapists in North America and hundreds more in Europe, England, Australia, and New Zealand. EFT is being taught in China, Taiwan, and Korea. More recently, major organizations, including the U.S. and Canadian military and the New York

City Fire Department, have sought my help in introducing EFT to distressed members and their partners.

EFT's ever-broadening acceptance and application has also brought growing awareness of this approach to the public. Increasingly, I have been besieged by pleas for a simple, popular version of EFT, one ordinary folks can read and apply on their own. Here it is.

*Hold Me Tight* is designed to be used by all couples, young, old, married, engaged, cohabiting, happy, distressed, straight, gay; in short, all partners seeking a lifetime of love. It is for women and for men. It is for people from all walks of life and all cultures; everyone on this planet has the same basic need for connection. It is 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.

I've divided the book into three parts. Part One answers the age-old question of what love is. It explains how we often slip into disconnection and lose our love, in spite of the best intentions and the greatest insights. It also documents and synthesizes the massive explosion of recent research into close relationships. As Howard Markman of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver says, "This is moon shot time for couple therapy and education."

We are, at last, building a science of intimate relationships. We are mapping out how our conversations and actions reflect our deepest needs and fears and build or tear down our most precious connections with others. This book offers lovers a new world, a new understanding of how to love and love well.

Part Two is the streamlined version of EFT. It presents seven conversations that capture the defining moments in a love relationship, and it instructs you, the reader, on how to shape these moments to create a secure and lasting bond. Case histories and Play and Practice sections in each conversation bring the lessons of EFT alive in your own relationships.

Part Three addresses the power of love. Love has an immense ability to help heal the devastating wounds that life sometimes deals us. Love also enhances our sense of connection to the larger world. Loving responsiveness is the foundation of a truly compassionate, civilized society.

To help you through the book, I've included a glossary of important terms at the end.

I owe the development of EFT to all the couples I've seen over the years, and I make liberal use of their stories, disguising names and details to protect privacy, throughout this book. All stories are composites of many cases and are simplified to reflect the general truths I have learned from the thousands of couples I have seen. They will teach you as they taught me. This book is my attempt to pass that knowledge on.

I started seeing couples in the early 1980s. Twenty-five years later, it amazes me that I still feel passionately excited when I sit down in a room to work with a couple. I still get exhilarated when partners suddenly understand one another's heartfelt messages and risk reaching out to each other. Their struggle and determination daily enlightens and inspires me to keep my own precious connection with others alive.

We all live out the drama of connection and disconnection. Now we can do it with understanding. I hope this book will help you turn your relationship into a glorious adventure. The journey outlined in these pages has been just that for me.

"Love is everything it's cracked up to be . . .," Erica Jong has written. "It really is worth fighting for, being brave for, risking everything for. And the trouble is, if you don't risk anything, your risk is even greater." I couldn't agree more.

**PART ONE**

*A New Light on Love*

## *Love – A Revolutionary New View*

“We live in the shelter of each other.”

– *Celtic saying*

Love may be the most used and the most potent word in the English language. We write tomes about it, pen poems about it. We sing about it and pray for it. We fight wars for it (see Helen of Troy) and build monuments to it (see the Taj Mahal). We soar on its declaration — “I love you!” — and plummet at its dissolution — “I don’t love you anymore!” We think about it and talk about it — endlessly.

But what is it really?

Scholars and practitioners have wrestled with definitions and understanding for centuries. To some cold-blooded observers, love is a mutually beneficial alliance based on trading favors, a give-get bargain. Others, more historically inclined, regard it as a sentimental social custom created by the minstrels of thirteenth-century France. Biologists and anthropologists view it as a strategy to ensure the transmission of genes and rearing of offspring.

But to most people love has been and remains still a mystical elusive emotion, open to description but defying definition. Back in the 1700s, Benjamin Franklin, an astute student in so many areas, could only attest to love as “changeable, transient and accidental.” More recently, Marilyn Yalom, in her scholarly book on the history of the wife, admitted defeat and called love an “intoxicating mixture of sex and sentiment that no one can

define.” My English barmaid mother’s description of love as a “funny five minutes” is just as apt, if a little more cynical.

Today, though, we can no longer afford to define love as a mysterious force beyond our ken. It has become too important. For better or worse, in the twenty-first century, a love relationship has become the *central* emotional relationship in most people’s lives.

One reason is that we are increasingly living in social isolation. Writers like Robert Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone* point out that we suffer from a dangerous loss of “social capital.” (This term was coined in 1916 by a Virginia educator, who noted the continuous help, sympathy, and fellowship that neighbors offered each other.) Most of us no longer live in supportive communities with our birth families or childhood friends close at hand. We work longer and longer hours, commute farther and farther distances, and thus have fewer and fewer opportunities to develop close relationships.

Most often, the couples I see in my practice live in a community of two. The majority of folks in a 2006 National Science Foundation survey reported that the number of people in their circle of confidants was dropping, and a growing number stated that they had no one at all to confide in. As the Irish poet John O’Donohue puts it, “There is a huge and leaden loneliness settling like a frozen winter on so many humans.”

Inevitably, we now ask our lovers for the emotional connection and sense of belonging that my grandmother could get from a whole village. Compounding this is the celebration of romantic love fostered by our popular culture. Movies as well as television soap operas and dramas saturate us with images of romantic love as the be-all and end-all of relationships, while newspapers, magazines, and TV news avidly report on the never-ending search for romance and love among actors and celebrities. So it should come as no surprise that people recently surveyed in the U.S. and Canada rate a satisfying love relationship as their number-one goal, ahead of financial success and satisfying career.

It is, then, imperative that we comprehend what love is, how to make it, and how to make it last. Thankfully, during the past two decades, an exciting



and revolutionary new understanding of love has been emerging.

We now know that love is, in actuality, the pinnacle of evolution, the most compelling survival mechanism of the human species. Not because it induces us to mate and reproduce. We do manage to mate without love! But because love drives us to bond emotionally with a precious few others who offer us safe haven from the storms of life. Love is our bulwark, designed to provide emotional protection so we can cope with the ups and downs of existence.

This drive to emotionally attach — to find someone to whom we can turn and say “Hold me tight” — is wired into our genes and our bodies. It is as basic to life, health, and happiness as the drives for food, shelter, or sex. We need emotional attachments with a few irreplaceable others to be physically and mentally healthy — to survive.

## **A NEW THEORY OF ATTACHMENT**

Clues to love’s true purpose have been circulating for a long time. Back in 1760, a Spanish bishop writing to his superiors in Rome noted that children in foundling homes, though they were sheltered and fed, regularly “die from sadness.” In the 1930s and 1940s, in the halls of American hospitals, orphan children, deprived only of touch and emotional contact, died in droves. Psychiatrists also began identifying children who were physically healthy but who seemed indifferent, callous, and unable to relate to others. David Levy, reporting his observations in a 1937 article in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, attributed such youngsters’ behavior to “emotional starvation.” In the 1940s American analyst René Spitz coined the term “failure to thrive” for children separated from their parents and caught in debilitating grief.

But it remained for John Bowlby, a British psychiatrist, to figure out exactly what was going on. Let me be honest. As a psychologist and as a human being, if I had to give an award for the single best set of ideas anyone had ever had, I’d give it to John Bowlby hands down over Freud or anyone else in the business of understanding people. He grabbed the threads of

observations and reports and wove them into a coherent and masterful theory of attachment.

Born in 1907, Bowlby, the son of a baronet, was raised, in the fashion of the upper class, primarily by nannies and governesses. His parents allowed him to join them at the dinner table after he turned twelve, and then only for dessert. He was sent off to boarding school and then attended Trinity College, Cambridge. Bowlby's life departed from tradition when he volunteered to work in the innovative residential schools for emotionally maladjusted children being started by visionaries like A. S. Neill. These schools focused on offering emotional support rather than the usual stern discipline.

Intrigued by his experiences, Bowlby went on to medical school and then took psychiatric training, which included undergoing seven years of psychoanalysis. His analyst apparently found him a difficult patient. Influenced by mentors like Ronald Fairbairn, who argued that Freud had underestimated the need for other people, 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.

Working with disturbed youngsters at the Child Guidance Clinics in London, he began to believe that blighted relationships with parents had left them with only a few, negative ways to deal with basic feelings and needs. Later, in 1938, as a beginning clinician under the supervision of the noted analyst Melanie Klein, Bowlby was assigned a young hyperactive boy who had an extremely anxious mother. He was not allowed to talk to the mother, however, since only the child's projections and fantasies were deemed of interest. That infuriated Bowlby. His experience spurred him to formulate his own idea, namely that the quality of the connection to loved ones and early emotional deprivation is key to the development of personality and to an individual's habitual way of connecting with others.

In 1944, Bowlby published the very first paper on family therapy, *Forty-four Juvenile Thieves*, in which he noted that "behind the mask of

indifference is bottomless misery and behind apparent callousness, despair.” Bowlby’s young charges were frozen in the attitude “I will never be hurt again” and paralyzed in desperation and rage.

Following World War II, Bowlby was asked by the World Health Organization to do a study of European children left homeless and orphaned by the conflict. His findings confirmed his belief in the reality of emotional starvation and his conviction that loving contact is as important as physical nutrition. Along with his studies and observations, Bowlby was impressed by Charles Darwin’s ideas of how natural selection favors responses that help survival. Bowlby came to the conclusion that keeping precious others close is a brilliant survival technique wired in by evolution.

Bowlby’s theory was radical and noisily rejected. Indeed, it almost got him thrown out of the British Psychoanalytic Society. Conventional wisdom held that coddling by mothers and other family members created clingy, overdependent youngsters who grew up into incompetent adults. Keeping an antiseptic rational distance was the proper way to rear children. That objective stance held even when youngsters were distressed and physically ill. In Bowlby’s era, parents were not allowed to stay in the hospital with their sick sons and daughters; they had to drop the children off at the door.

In 1951, Bowlby and a young social worker, James Robertson, made a movie called *A Two-Year-Old Goes to Hospital*, graphically showing a little girl’s angry protest, terror, and despair at being left alone in a hospital. Robertson showed the film to the Royal Society of Medicine in London in the hope that physicians would comprehend a child’s stress at separation from loved ones and need for connection and comfort. It was dismissed as a fraud and almost banned. Well into the 1960s in Britain and the United States, parents still typically were allowed to visit their hospitalized offspring for only one hour a week.

Bowlby needed to find another way to prove to the world what he knew in his heart. A Canadian researcher, Mary Ainsworth, who became his assistant, showed him how to do that. She devised a very simple experiment to look at the four behaviors that Bowlby and she believed were basic to

attachment: that we monitor and maintain emotional and physical closeness with our beloved; that we reach out for this person when we are unsure, upset, or feeling down; that we miss this person when we are apart; and that we count on this person to be there for us when we go out into the world and explore.

The experiment was called the Strange Situation and has generated literally thousands of scientific studies and revolutionized developmental psychology. A researcher invites a mother and child into an unfamiliar room. After a few minutes, the mother leaves the child alone with the researcher, who tries to offer comfort if needed. Three minutes later, the mother comes back. The separation and reunion are repeated once more.

The majority of children are upset when their mothers walk out; they rock themselves, cry, throw toys. But some prove more emotionally resilient. They calm themselves quickly and effectively, reconnect easily with their mothers on their return, and rapidly resume playing while checking to make sure that their moms are still around. They seem confident that their mothers will be there if needed. Less resilient youngsters, however, are anxious and aggressive or detached and distant on their mothers' return. The kids who can calm themselves usually have warmer, more responsive mothers, while the moms of the angry kids are unpredictable in their behavior and the moms of detached kids are colder and dismissive. In these simple studies of disconnection and reconnection, Bowlby saw love in action and began to code its patterns.

Bowlby's theory gained still greater currency a few years later when he produced a famed trilogy on human attachment, separation, and loss. His colleague Harry Harlow, a psychologist at the University of Wisconsin, also drew attention to the power of what he called "contact comfort" by reporting his own dramatic research with young monkeys separated from their mothers at birth. He discovered that the isolated infants were so hungry for connection that when given the choice between a "mother" made out of wire who dispensed food and a soft-cloth mother without food, they would choose the squashy rag mother almost every time. Generally, Harlow's experiments