

Awareness Integration therapy with Couples: Happily Ever After!

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Abstract

Contemporary media throughout the world promotes the promise of a life of "happily ever after" with a significant other, as if acquiring the relationship is paramount in the couple's life together. Courtship is treated as if it is the state where couples sufficiently acquire the necessary skills to sustain their relationship. It appears that many couples who are blinded by love, often find themselves stung by cupid's arrow and startled by a rude awakening—a happily ever after marriage demands time, attention, and multiple skills from both partners. The lack of "staying power" in marriage by one or both partners is a fact supported by statistics that reveal some harsh realities about the state of marriage in the 21st Century. This report addresses the multidimensional topic of love to lay a foundation leading to an investigation designed to explore the trustworthiness of Awareness Integration Therapy (AIT) as a credible approach to couples therapy. The "theories of love," are explored by defining love, and suggesting approaches for sustaining love in relationships with the goal of achieving lasting love through marital longevity. A proposed investigation that focuses on the phases a therapist uses when following AIT with a couple is suggested to explore AIT. There is strong anecdotal evidence from members of the field of clinical psychology that AIT has the potential to advance the field of psychology in couples therapy. These validations from marriage psychologists are based on numerous case reports highlighting AITs contribution to couples for sustaining marital satisfaction and thus longevity.

Keywords: Awareness integration therapy • Couples therapy • Longevity • Marriage

Introduction

Contemporary media throughout the world promotes the promise of a life of happily ever after with a significant other! Catchy lyrics and stirring melodies raise the emotions of the most stoic individual when romanticizing about their fantasy date. Romance novels command the attention of vacationing middle-aged women. Movie dialogue suggests that someday we will find that one true love and experience bliss, if even for a brief moment before the Titanic sinks. Other voices remind young lovers that "love and marriage, go together like a horse and carriage...you can't have one, you can't have none, without the other." The warnings from parents and friends instill self-doubt when the miseries of being alone are stressed. Societal pressures reveal the frustrations one experiences while longing for the ideal mate, the thrill of the chase, and finally relief at finding the one true love—"the match" made in heaven!

But what about the rest? Apparently, from the attention the first part receives, the rest is supposed to be effortless! Storybooks treat "happily ever after" as if acquiring the relationship is paramount in the couple's lives together and courtship is the state where they need to gain relational skills and put in time, effort, and attention. What happens to that empty promise of effortless happiness during the ever after? Does this mean that relationships demand work from couples if there is to be the happily ever after? It appears many couples, who are blinded by love, find themselves stung by cupid's arrow and startled by their rude awakening—a fact that is supported by statistics revealing some harsh realities.

Background

Between the years 2000 to 2020, the marriage rate in the United States was 5.1 per 1,000 total population, and the divorce rate was 2.3 per 1,000 population [1]. To change this trend, not only are skills required for choosing a life partner, but individuals also need strategies for building, maintaining, sustaining, and finding satisfaction in their relationships. The multidimensional topic of love is discussed to lay a foundation for considering an innovative approach to couple's therapy. The review of relevant literature explores topics related to love such as defining love, sustaining love in relationships, and achieving lasting love with marital longevity. It is suggested that Awareness Integration Therapy (AIT) will advance the field of psychology relevant to couple's therapy for sustaining marital satisfaction and thus longevity.

Literature Review

A high level of attachment is required for a couple to achieve a state of "happily ever after" [2]. Waldinger intimated that there are benefits resulting from a close and secure attachment with one's mate in findings from his 75 year old study at Harvard University [2]. Waldinger suggested individuals within the relationship feel fulfilled when they have close and secure attachments with their mates [2]. He found an individual's capacity for memory stayed intact longer as happy couples age [2]. Brown and Fredrickson highlighted positivity resonance as a co-experienced positive affect leading to physical health and well-being leading to longevity [3]. In writing about positivity resonance theory, Wells et al. suggested emotion response systems that are shared by individuals engaged in social interactions are features found in positivity resonance [4]. Thus, positivity resonance may contribute to "the glue" that holds marriages together and sustains attachments that last despite all the stressors that life presents.

Types of love

Eight types of love with different configurations were introduced:

- Nonlove is described as casual relationships in which all three elements are absent.
- Liking usually describes a feeling in friendships or acquaintances where one can have the experience of intimacy without passion or commitment.
- Infatuated love is described as experiencing passionate arousal without intimacy or commitment.
- Empty love refers to a decision to love someone and commit to them without intimacy or passion.
- Romantic love is a combination of intimacy and passion and not necessarily commitment.
- Companionate love is a combination of intimacy and decision/commitment, a long-term committed friendship without the physical, passionate attraction.
- Fatuous love is a combination of passion and decision/commitment components with no intimacy.

- Consummate love is described as the full combination of all three components.

Triangular theory of love

Sternberg presented a triangular theory of love which explained loves in different relationship [5]. The model encompasses three components of intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment. In defining the term "love," Sternberg suggested, "Love is a complex whole that appears to derive in part from genetically transmitted instincts and drives but probably in larger part from socially learned role modeling that, through observation, comes to be defined as love" [5]. To suggest a theory of love, Sternberg introduced the Triangular "Theory of Love" made up of three components: intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment [5]. The levels of each of those three elements are significantly related to the degree of love experienced. The intensity of love that one feels depends on how strongly these three elements relate to and connect with each other. Intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment are related to the actions each element promotes in a relationship while creating varied or different types of loving experiences. In the following sections I will explore each component and briefly present relevant research.

Intimacy

Intimacy is the emotional investment derived from the closeness, connectedness, and bondedness in loving relationships. Intimacy may include wanting the best for the loved one, experiencing happiness while being with them, holding them in high regard, counting on them when in need, and receiving and giving support. Intimacy can include mutual understanding, sharing of self and belongings, having deep and close communication, and genuinely valuing having the loved one in one's life. There is also a temporal course for intimacy, passion, decision/commitment. Intimacy is built through paired action sequences or scripts, and emotion is experienced by interruption or disruption in interpersonal relations [6]. For example, early in a relationship there was a high degree of uncertainty. As time continues, the interruptions decrease due to individuals becoming more predictable and depend on consistency from each other. As interruptions reduce, so will intense emotions. In this same theme, Livingston referred to love as an uncertainty-reducing process [7]. The decrease in intimacy can be considered as a deepening interpersonal bonding. Although from afar, a deep latent intimacy could look like a failing relationship. The differences in degrees of intimacy can immediately be seen and felt when an interruption occurs, whether it reunites to become deeper or breaks.

Intimacy can be expressed through communicating positive feelings toward one another, wishing the best for the other, promoting the other's well-being in decision-making processes, sharing quality time, fostering expression of empathy and compassion for one another, and sharing and offering emotional and material support. On the other hand, too much predictability creates stagnation, which also undermines intimacy. To alleviate the deterioration in intimacy, researchers suggest that it is crucial to introduce change into monotony by traveling together, or finding mutual interests, or adopting new behavioral patterns. By studying the concept of intimacy more deeply, researchers found it is the core of loving relationships, but it is not limited to certain loving relationships.

Passion

The impulses that lead to romance, physical attraction, and sexual consummation are derived from motivational involvement in the relationship. A range of personal needs such as self-esteem, nurturance, dependence, dominance/submission, and self-actualization can contribute to passion. Passion draws one toward the relationship, but intimacy sustains closeness and longevity. The dance between passion and intimacy vary across persons and situations, but they are certainly a duo. Passion, as a physical experience, can surge instantaneously with no rhyme or reason upon meeting an attractive person. This arousal rises quickly, peaks rapidly, begin to habituate, and eventually declines even below the baseline. This decline in arousal results in a feeling of loss, sadness, remorse, and grief about the experience. One gradually begins to moderate and ultimately returns to their normal baseline. Analyzing relational needs that seek fulfillment to sustain passion in a long-term relationship is crucial. One can continue to fulfill the needs, recognize those not being fulfilled, and develop actions to meet those needs. Behaviors such as kissing, hugging, gazing, flirting, touching

and making love will foster passion.

Decision/Commitment

The short-term decision to love someone and the long-term cognitive decision to commit to upholding that love over the long term goes together occasionally. Loving someone does not automatically imply a commitment to love or the relationship. The institution of marriage represents the legalization of the commitment to love one another for a lifetime; however, it cannot promise that love lasts. It certainly is structured to hold one through the rough times even if the feeling of love is not experienced. Commitment is a process. Generally, a relationship starts at a zero baseline—possibly with the idea of being ready for a committed relationship but not to a particular person—then it gradually develops through getting to know someone. If the connection is successful, it speeds up over the long term and then levels off. If the relationship begins to falter, the level of commitment descends, possibly toward the end of the relationship, back to zero. Sustaining commitment includes upholding the relationship as the highest priority and putting intimacy and passion into consistent action. Pledging integrity; upholding fidelity, honesty, and transparency; and staying in a relationship through hard times are all expressions of commitment. Cultural and legal structures based on decisions such as engagement, cohabitation, and marriage can be the container that holds the context of commitment.

Balancing the three components of love

Though their significance varies from relationship to relationship, the three elements of intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment are all fundamental characteristics of loving relationships. The importance of these three aspects of love can and does change over time, both inside a relationship and between relationships at a given moment. The geometry of these three elements looked upon as a triangle depends upon the amount of love and the balance of love. The more intense all three components of the triangle, the amount of love experienced is greater. When the three components of love are equally matched there is balance and one of the areas does not have more significance than the others.

Models of love

Three theories explained models of love. The Spearmanian, Thomsonian, and Thurstonian theories are listed below.

Spearmanian Theory The Spearmanian theory of general intelligence in terms of a structural model of love, is described as an undifferentiated "glob" of non-decomposable and highly positive feelings.

Thomsonian Theory: The Thomsonian theory of the "bonds" of intelligence is a structural model of love. It is the togetherness sampling of a composite experience resulting from many underlying bonds co-occurring in close relationships.

Thurstonian Theory: The Thurstonian theory views love as a small, consistent set of feelings of equal importance in the overall experience. Sternberg's data analysis supported a Thomsonian model in which love is decomposable in a hierarchical cluster analysis. The intensity of love that one feels may differ toward different individuals [5]. The amount of love that one experiences toward their nuclear family member does not predict similar intensity for a lover or a best friend.

Core triad of balance theory

The Core Triad of Balance Theory by Gottman stated that perception, physiology, and behavior are the three domains that individually and together act as interactive thermostats in marriage [8]. According to Gottman, each of these three domains can be balanced as a homeostatic set point connected to marital harmony [8]. Each of the domains also has a negative threshold that, when crossed, causes a marriage to become more unstable. Newlyweds' communication and conflict-resolution modifications likely impact and change the couple's marital perspectives. Gottman and others suggested that conduct shapes perceptions. By the time couples have children, many of their communication styles and viewpoints on the union and their spouse may have lost the flexibility of the newlywed stage [8,9]. The stability of the marriage is predicted by newlyweds' perceptions of their spouse and their union with 87% accuracy at the 4

year-6 year mark and 81% accuracy at the 7 year-9 year mark. These findings supported the idea that spouses' selective attention to the positive or destructive features of their partner and the marriage shapes the future course of the marriage. Gottman explained the concept of marital cognition by including attribution, expectations, assumptions, and selective attention [8]. Attribution is noted by the explanations spouses give for their behaviors or for the other. Expectations refer to the couple's predictions about future outcomes of their lives together from everyday interactions. Assumptions refer to the way one spouse's belief is projected into the other person's views of how the world operates. The perceptual process of selective attention refers to the aspect of an event to which one pays attention based on a cognitive schema. When balance does not exist in a marital relationship, the couple frequently seeks therapy to reestablish balance in the relationship.

AIT in couple's therapy

This paper explores the concept of conscious and intentional coupling through Awareness Integration Theory (AIT). AIT suggests that each person is responsible and accountable for what they bring into their marriage. The components brought into their union include unique styles of feeling and expressing love, intimacy, passion, communication skills, and cognitive and perceptual discourse. What results is a unique creation from their relationship that reflects who they are as a couple as all the components become unified. This paper asserts that the six-phase AIT intervention addresses awareness, integration, and behavioral actions more efficiently toward long-standing marital satisfaction and fulfillment. AIT is an educative and skill-building theory and includes the awareness of the thought process, emotions, behaviors, and the impact of the attitude. It allows tools to be more aware of the present moment as actions and reactions are delivered. It also connects the current cognitive, emotional, and behavioral automatic process to past learnings, role modeling, and traumatic events, allowing one to complete, heal and integrate into the whole system of one's present life. AIT then guides the couple to be intentional with values, thoughts, feelings, and actions toward envisioning an intended favorite result. Identify the skills and strengths that are already learned that can be utilized, but also the skills that are needed to be gained to create the intended result [10].

Awareness integration theory

AIT is a multi-modality psychotherapeutic model that enhances self-awareness, releases past traumas and psychological blocks, and promotes clarity and positive attitudes. The AIT model was created by synthesizing information and techniques from previous models such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), existential therapy, person-centered therapy, Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT), and Mind Body Therapy (MBT). Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) and hypnosis also contributed to formation of the model. AIT incorporates various aspects of these treatments into one efficient, open-structured model that encompasses all aspects of the human experience to maximize its effectiveness and create enduring results [10]. Because it is a comprehensive model, AIT has the edge over other couples' psychotherapy approaches. In addition to helping the client deal with the past and the present, it also includes cognitive, emotional, physical, and behavioral elements as they construct a trajectory leading to their construction of future fulfillment in life. AIT is distinctive in that, in contrast to earlier models, it focuses on demolishing harmful core beliefs that a person has assigned to oneself or other relationships. The person's identity, formerly centered on trauma, is altered. Every aspect of the client's life is infused with neutral or constructive functional ideas and attitudes, while the client's negative beliefs are changed and impact their identity. AIT dismantles the selected and assigned core belief to prevent the trigger from being activated instead of merely challenging beliefs by either challenging or replacing them with adaptive surface thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. The client can thereby adopt a healthy persona and experience long-lasting changes [11].

Six phases of AIT

As couples therapy, AIT follows a six-phase intervention model. The six phases are elaborated upon in the following section.

Phase One: Phase One promotes awareness of the client's perceptions, emotions, and behaviors with their mate and how those constructs impact

their relationship. Questions in this phase include: What do you think of your mate? How do you feel about your mate? How do you behave towards your mate? How do your thoughts, feelings, and acts toward your mate affect your relationship?

Phase Two: Phase Two encompasses three functions: to create awareness of the client's projections of their mate's opinions and feelings about them; to enhance the client's ability to observe their mate's behavior towards them and the meanings the client attributes to that behavior; and to identify ways in which these constructs impact the person's relationship. Questions in phase two include: What do you assume your mate thinks about you? How do you presume your mate feels about you? What do you observe and assume about your mate's behavior towards you? How do your assumptions impact your relationship?

Phase Three: Phase three fosters awareness of clients' beliefs, emotions, and behaviors about themselves as a self-being in their relationship. This is directed toward the client's awareness of their identity and core beliefs about the self. Questions in this phase include: As who you are in your relationship, what do you think about yourself? How do you feel about yourself? How do you behave toward yourself? What is the impact of the way you treat yourself in your relationship?

Phase Four: In phase four, the therapist helps partners to identify a negative core belief about the self. The incidents that were the source of deciding the core belief about the self are visited to be integrated into the whole system. The person is guided toward experiencing and linking the associated memories to the chosen belief system and intense emotions. The person is trained to connect the present moment strength to the younger memory's experience of powerlessness to integrate the separate parts and assign a more realistic value and meaning toward the self-identity. This process is done by asking the person to take one negative core belief from phase three and notice the emotion and body sensation around that belief. Allow the body sensation and the sentiment to take the person to the earliest or original memory when they felt the feeling and declared the core belief system. When the person retrieves the memory, they are asked about their experience as a child, then ask their adult self about their view of the past incident. The process of integration is having the adult self, remind the younger self in that memory regarding the years of strength, resilience, and results that realistically have been gained and incorporate the strength and wealth of information available now vs. being caught in the helpless and powerless position of the past.

Phase Five: In phase five, each person declares their personal mission statement, which incorporates their values, chosen beliefs, chosen emotions, and committed actions in their relationship and their life. Then the couple also creates a relationship/ marriage mission statement that incorporates who they intend to be in their relationship. Each then makes their short- and long-term goals for the connection. They negotiate action plans to reach their goals.

Phase Six: In phase six, the couple creates sustainable and manageable structures such as date nights, family nights, vacations, collages, etc., to continue making the intended result. These six phases can be explored in different areas of life and relationship, including matehood, sexuality, parenthood, children, finances, parents, in-laws, and more, depending on other essential factors within a particular relationship.

Discussion

AIT open structured intervention creates an emotional containment for the couple to gain access to awareness as well as practice healthy communication. This approach allows trust and safety to be built and refrains from the open forum of couples starting each session with their harmful pile of held-up criticisms that are shared in contempt and leads to defensiveness. Bradbury and Fincham linked memory and affect and argued that individuals most likely retrieve memory units with the same effect as their present mood [12]. Couples who are upset, angry, or sad are more likely to remember adverse events that produce similar feelings for them than positive ones. Fincham et al. theorized that these past negative events become the compass for the unhappy spouse to give meaning to their present marital interactions and to foresee future actions [9]. Therefore, holding the person responsible and accountable for their thoughts, feelings, behavior, and impacts in the session as they are narrating about their relationship takes the focus from all or nothing/victim vs. villain aspect of the experience. Most research on

the transition to parenthood has found that couples' positive interchange decreases, conflict increases, and overall marital satisfaction decreases [6]. Wives who become mothers have a significantly steeper decline in marital satisfaction than wives who remain childless. Fondness, admiration, and high expansiveness or awareness can act as buffers to protect the intimacy of the relationship through stressful transitions to parenthood. Disappointment in the marriage, a negative outlook toward one's spouse, and holding unrealistic expectations from each other lead to instability and chaos in the couple's lives. This may reflect downfalls in the relationship that become increasingly problematic during periods of stress, such as the transition to parenthood. The couple's intensity of pressure and their outward conflict adds tension to the environment that they are raising their children. The stress leads to a more emotional and behavioral impact on the children, creating more friction for the couple as parents. After having a baby, 67 percent of couples see their marital satisfaction plummet [13]; however, the other 33% reported when they use skills to foster friendship, intimacy, constructive conflict, and a sense of shared meaning, they can upkeep their marital satisfaction. The AIT model participant learns to recognize and identify all the unconstructive and scattered thoughts and destructive mental strategies. The individual learns new techniques to integrate positive thoughts and constructive mental capacities through working on these negative and critical cognitive processes. Consequently, the mental crisis is averted, and equilibrium is achieved [14]. In parenthood, the couple can commit to fostering their lovehood and creating flourishing structures while spending quality time as a family and parent with their children. They can also communicate, negotiate, learn new parenting skills, and agree on a parenting style they can both commit to and support each other as the skills are implemented.

Twelve sessions of AIT intervention

- Session 1: Overall History Interview (OHI) from the wife and husband.
- Session 2: Phases 1, 2, and 3 in the area of matehood for both wife and husband.
- Session 3: Phase 4 for the wife.
- Session 4: Phase 4 for the husband.
- Session 5: Phase 5 for both wife and husband – the creation of individual and couple mission statement.
- Session 6: Phase 1,2,3,4,5 area of relationship with own parents – Phase 6 will be done at home.
- Session 7: Phase 1,2,3,4,5 area of Sexuality – Phase 6 will be done at home.
- Session 8: Phase 1,2,3,4,5 area of finance – Phase 6 will be done at home.
- Session 9: Phase 1,2,3,4,5 area of parenting – Phase 6 will be done at home.
- Session 10: Phase 1,2,3,4,5 area of In-laws – Phase 6 will be done at home.
- Session 11: Presenting phase 6 – maintain structures - in all areas of life.
- Session 12: Skill Building – Communication Skills.

After going through the AIT interventions for 12 weeks, the couple learns the skills to foster continuous satisfaction and fulfillment in their marriage. A high degree of satisfaction is expected with the AIT model due to the couple creating intentional commitment to values, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. In addition, the couple is able to sustain structures to maintain their communication. Using AIT is beneficial in couple's therapy since people come to each relationship with prior assumptions and perceptions that they have selected from their earlier relationships. Love is a complex phenomenon that appears to source from genetically transmitted instincts and drives. Relationships involve socially learned role modeling through observation that is felt and recognized as love. As the couple goes through each phase, they become aware of how their internal thought, belief, assumptions, projections, and all the emotions associated with them produces behaviors that impact their relationship in positive or negative behaviors. With this awareness, they become more in control of their automatic reactions. Each person also becomes aware of how their belief and emotions about themselves set the tone for how they show up and interact within the relationship. Most of the time, each person projects their way of seeing themselves onto their mate and then reacts to their mate as if they are being judged. In Phase Three, each couple member owns how they show up as a mate. This also allows them to become more open to sharing their vulnerable self with their partner. They have to be willing to trust each other to become vulnerable. Phase Four opens the

path for one mate to focus on their integration while the other contains the space of love, acceptance, and compassion. This process brings the couple's vulnerable side up for each other and rebuilds and repairs their safety bond. It also brings awareness to a couple of the sources of unhealthy reactions. Phase Four allows a couple to understand the internal process of their mate and empathize with it versus assigning malice intention toward their unhealthy reactions. It is much easier to request a change of behavior when one understands the source of the partner's response rather than feel threatened by thinking that their mate intends to harm them and, therefore, must protect themselves or attack to survive. This also teaches each person to use this integration process when they have intense emotions regarding an issue that shows up first before communicating immediately to their mate. The time to take care of own emotions and getting clear what the reaction is coming from helps minimize reactionary arguments. Phase Five allows the couple to become intentional about their actions and the result that they want to create. This process will enable them to clarify their needs, share them and commit to actualizing them together. It is the rope to hold on to bring the person back to what is important to them creating a healthy, intimate, passionate, and committed relationship. Since the couple makes the clarification, declarations, and commitments together, they can support each other in obtaining it. In this phase, they can set clear goals about their lovehood and matehood and act toward getting the goals. Creating rituals and structures in phase six keeps their communication and commitment intact and ongoing. After the couple goes through the six phases of their matehood, they go through each area that may appear out of alignment. Sexuality, finances, parents, and in-laws are usual areas in which couples need major negotiations and realignments. These areas change from singlehood to couplehood as years of marriage expand. Sexuality changes from the courting phase to the newlywed, continuing the day to day routine and becoming parents. Finances usually require a mutual system that works for both and is agreed upon by both to be informed and managed appropriately in unity. Sharing their sexual needs and desires is essential and continuous since wants and needs change over time. Setting boundaries and shifting the priority of the new nucleus family from the original family is a transition for each member of the couple. Supporting each other through this transition is essential. Being aware that each family dynamic, attachment, and separation may take a different route and time frame. Having in-laws, relating to them, and creating boundaries other than our parents and different from our mates' boundaries with their parents becomes essential. Going through the six phases of AIT in these areas of life facilitates awareness, flexibility, communication, agreeableness, negotiation, and alignment.

Conclusion

A successful marriage certainly is a tall order. It takes an aware, responsible, and accountable person to form a long-term union with another entirely different person with a diverse background and create successful endeavors and projects as they go through natural life phases. Long-term marriages mainly include sharing the same space, combining financial decision makings, entering into each other's family and society, impacting each other's career, and raising healthy citizens for the world. The more a person can be aware and responsible for the self they bring into the union, there is room for intentional creation versus recreation of their parents' dynamic within their marriage. The AIT interventions teach self analysis techniques and self-help methods for an individual to realize, recognize, address, and take on stressors in life. It also teaches participants how to develop emotional and cognitive mindfulness to help label and combat such stressors. The AIT research shows a significant reduction in anxiety, depression, and stress among the participants. Studies predominately show a correlation between positive attitude, practical strategies, and problem-solving. An overall feeling of well-being is instrumental in strategizing a problem solving technique to achieve a healthy psychological state in all dimensions.

Recommendations

AIT is presented as a new theoretical and intervention approach to couple's therapy to foster marital satisfaction among couples. By utilizing the most scientific approach to a couple's work, AIT offers a solid and practical open structure model that is valuable to the field of psychotherapy. AIT is flexible and able to create substantial results in the form of psychotherapy, coaching, workshops, or self-help modules. Studies are needed in using AIT with couples from different cultures, ages, LGBTQ marriages, childless

marriages, and other diverse unions, to determine the strength or shortcomings of the model.

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