

Interview with Dr. Sue Johnson: Hold Me Tight

Meet Dr. Sue Johnson, Director of the Ottawa (Canada) Couple and Family Institute and the International Center for Excellence in Emotionally Focused Therapy as well as Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Ottawa and Research Professor at Alliant University in San Diego, California. She is the author of four books. Her latest is "Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love." Based on a revolutionary new theory of love, Sue teaches couples the path to deep, connected life-long love, utilizing an easy to follow, 7 step approach. And don't miss Sue's exercise for you to try tonight.

Transcript

Chip August: Welcome to Sex, Love and Intimacy I'm your host Chip August and on today's show we are going to be talking to Dr. Susan Johnson. Sue Johnson is the director of the Ottawa Couple and family institute and the international centre for excellence in Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) as well as a professor of clinical psychology at the university of Ottawa and a research professor at Alliant University in San Diego California, She is a serious academic she is a researcher she has received numerous honors for her work and we're talking to her today because she is the author of four books the latest one being **Hold me tight: Seven conversations for a lifetime of love** and that's what we're going to be talking about *A Lifetime of Love* so welcome to the show Sue Johnson.

Sue Johnson: Hi there Chip! Happy to be here.

Chip August: And Ottawa just in case they went by the listeners to fast its Canada and we're talking to her, we're talking to Sue in Canada. Well Americans sometimes kind of miss that there are other countries in North America so...

Sue Johnson: Yes. We're that big pink strip on the map you got in the Arctic. They're actually quite large

Chip August: Our Northern neighbor .

Chip August: So your work lets just start with your work. Your work is concerned with a couple's therapy that u call EFT (Emotionally Focused Therapy) can u kind of summarize what EFT is?

Sue Johnson: yeah well, basically EFT started in the 80s and it was a response to the fact that most of the ways of helping people in their relationships were about teaching people to negotiate u know, negotiate better or teaching them communication skills or insight into the past and It

seems to me when I started working with couples that that really wasn't making the kind of changes those things weren't really making the kind of changes that couples really wanted and needed u know. Couples didn't just want to negotiate better about how much money to put in the savings account? People wanted to be loved and it seemed like we were sort of missing the mark with all those things so I started taping couples and working with couples and we started a research project where we put together an approach which was really based on the idea that love is an emotional bond and that it really depends on you being able to really respond to each other emotionally and create a safe emotional connection especially at key moments when people really need that. Umm and those days there wasn't much research what I just said to you and now there is a whole science of love that is based on the remark I just made that's got hundreds of studies behind it but we started working with couples to help them talk about their emotions in different ways, help them understand the signals they send to each other that kind of got them stuck in really negative patterns. Like, the most popular one in North America is one person demands and the other person hears it as an attack and withdraws the more that person withdraws the more the other person demands and you just spend you can spend some years in that and we sort of find ways of helping people have certain conversations that would help people step out of that and step into and this is even more important a really more open loving conversations where they could talk about their fears and needs in a way that put them close and what we found when we did research which umm to be honest shocked, what it shocked me I, I knew this seemed to help but the research was also amazing that it was so good and now 20 years later we have done many studies and basically we get best results of any approach to helping couples in North America. Most approaches don't have any research and our research tells us that we can help 7 out of 10 couples move out of distress to the point where u know they can say "No, we're no longer distressed. We're moving towards satisfaction" and the research tells us that those results are pretty stable. It's not like they only last u know for 6 months. So the results are very positive and I started thinking that it must be really terrible that this research and all this knowledge that we've learned working with thousands of couples over the years was all sitting in academic journals. But the people in the public u know, the public didn't do anything about this. So this started to really drive me crazy and I thought well I'm an academic and I'm a researcher but I've got to write a book to tell people about the fact that we really do know what loves about now and we know what goes wrong and we're getting pretty good at knowing how to fix it...

Chip August: yeah that's terrific **Sue Johnson:** and so I wrote *hold me tight*.

Chip August: Now what underlines this work or at least sort of some of the basis of this is a pretty different theory of love then what I...

Sue Johnson: yeah. **Chip August:** ... within what I read in most books. You're really looking at love out of the phenomena called attachment and I

would love for you to talk a little bit about sort of this.. This new way of looking at love.

Sue Johnson: Yes its very powerful and I think its only the real scientific theory of love that we've ever had and it was only started to attachment was put together by umm a British psychiatrist and I'm British originally and I think its god's little joke that a British psychiatrist would find out about love. I think really it should be a Californian who finds out about love. But anyways it was a British psychiatrist and he umm, started looking, he was asked after World War II to go and talk to widows and to talk to orphans and he started just really understanding that loneliness can kill you that we need, our brains are wired for a certain kind of emotional connection with a few people on the planet literally people who we know we are precious to, when we call, they'll turn towards us, they'll care for us that we matter to somebody and he started realizing that this was universal and when people didn't have this they literally, they got depressed, they got sick umm they were much more likely to die you know they used to call it failure to strive....

Chip August: mmm hmhhh

Sue Johnson: ...Umm in the hospitals in America in the 40s and 50s, they used to take these little sick children and put them in separate rooms and feed them and they couldn't figure out why they died because you know from the medical point of view there is no reason for them to die. So he started studying things like that and he started understanding umm studying mothers and children and looking at the patterns of behaviors between mothers and children and the mothers and children that seemed to interact in a way that created loving face connections and the mothers and children who couldn't interact that way who seemed to create this horrible ounces of distancing and angry distractions and he started to create a whole beautiful theory of how much we need love? And why we need love? and the basic emotions in love and how the moves that make up the love and this was between mothers and children and u know it took us an awful long time time, it took us until the 90s to suddenly say hey wait a minute, umm you know I don't love different because you guys are sexual components and its more mutual but actually if u look at a mother and a child, the way they gaze at each other, the way they touch each other. The kind of tension they give each other, the basic emotions were going backwards and forwards, hey that's actually not that different from two lovers you know and people started applying the same way of thinking and what they found was that adult lovers are amazingly like these mothers and babies. This is their bonding behavior, you can even see it in animals actually, in mammals any way that this basic bonding behaviors that we have as a species and that love is not just a sentimental idea or umm you know sort of what did some researchers say its actually not just frustrated sexuality that you fall in love with somebody cos

u want to make love with them but you can't, like the idea. Its actually about this deep wired in needs that's all about survival to know that u matter to somebody u know I talk in the book that the basic questions are behind ARE conversations. ARE conversations are, there are about are you there for me? And I talk about how in most arguments, really important arguments everyone has to scream but in the arguments that really sort of shape a relationship if you really listen people say "O! We're arguing about sex or money or the kids" if u really listen they're not arguing about that. They are arguing because someone is calling "Are u there for me? Do I matter to you? Will u come close when I call? Can I depend on you? And the answer is no or maybe ...

Chip August: yeah

Sue Johnson: That's what's happening the relationship.

Chip August: I wrote an article actually. I think its on my website where I decided that almost every conversation between two people who love each other can be deconstructed to "Do you love me? Do you love me still? Do u get that I love you? Do you know? Is my love being received?"

Sue Johnson: That's right

Chip August: ... all the conversation are always to reassure ourselves of that fundamental bond

Sue Johnson: Well, I think you're right and I think the basic layer is the quality of the connection, the process of connection you know and the trouble is we're not used to paying attention to that.

Chip August: Right.

Sue Johnson: So we actually do think that we're just having an argument about money.. **Chip August:** Right.

Sue Johnson: and we sort of don't tune into that at the level

Chip August: Right.

Sue Johnson: what Dolby said is that's the level that matters u either create a safe and secure bond with each other which helps you grow with people and one of the most revolutionary things he said is love like that makes you stronger and more independent. It doesn't turn you into a sort of wimp. You know I think one of the reasons we have taken so long to listen to his wisdom is that we had this idea that umm human beings adults are suppose to be self sufficient. You know well I don't think so there is no evidence in psychology that well functioning adults are self sufficient. In fact most of the evidence in psychology says that well functioning adults are the people who umm feel ok about trusting other people and depending on them when they need other people they can turn to them and get support you know...

Chip August: ok

Sue Johnson: that's strength..

Chip August: Welcome back to Sex, Love and Intimacy. I'm your host Chip August. We're talking to Dr. Sue Johnson. She's the author of a particularly nice book that I like called Hold me Tight, seven Conversations for a lifetime of love. When we took the break we were sort of talking about the underline theory of love. The thing that I was struck with as I was reading all that was umm just that umm if we're biologically programmed to love and to need love ...

Sue Johnson: yeah

Chip August: why doesn't love stay? Why doesn't it last? Why does it go away? Why do we give it up so easily?

Sue Johnson: well I think one of the things is we haven't concluded it at all we have just considered it almost kind of a side line in life we've considered it that it was just sort of about sexuality and it was bound to disappear. The idea that love is sort of a fever and you fall in love and then it just disappears and everyone knows that and then you get all the bitterness of living so we've had some funny ideas about love but haven't helped us at all to pay attention to it in the right way and nurture it in the right way. But I think also when u don't understand something you know I mean love is a sort of dance and you know there are moments in any dance when you step on somebody's toes, when you turn you miss each other you know you're not tuned in and just when you want the person to turn towards you they turn away you know moments like that in any dance and I think when we don't understand the dance we're caught up in umm we can start to really loose that real sense of safe connection with each other and there's only so many of us who can deal with that. If this is the strength of theory that tells you what goes wrong and how it goes wrong you know umm really we're not terribly diverse when you think of love we've only got a few moves in this dance. If when I'm feeling disconnected from you and suddenly you're not kind of with me we're not moving into the same music I feel safe enough to turn to you and say "Hey Chip! Somehow I'm feeling disconnected maybe I'm feeling a little lonely I want you to come and connect with me. I want you to come and be with me and you could respond "Ohm! I didn't know you were feeling that way come here let me hold your hands, give you a hug." That's a really positive relationship. People can reach for each other they can reconnect when they find sort of space between them and in that relationship we know from research that if you have that relationship you're more able to assert yourself you're more able to talk about what u need. You're gonna have a better sex life, you're more able to convey, your relationship is going to support you out in the world so that you're less likely to be overwhelmed by stress. I mean all kinds of incredible things that spin out from the quality of the interactions I am talking to you know. If u can't do that , if you really miss each other and the other person starts to feel like the enemy and you

start protecting yourself we move into well , I don't know what to do this is a bit scary I'm feeling off balance I think you're mad at me so what I'm going to do is shut down and move away. Ummm and I'll wait for you to stop being mad.

Chip August: Right

Sue Johnson: the trouble with that one is I shut down I shut u out and we have a very hard time from seeing the impact we have on other people in these hot interactions. We're caught up in all kinds of emotions we move our feet to deal with that emotions but we don't see when we move our feet the look of horror on the other person's face and so when we shut down we shut the other person out that makes them anxious all we say when we can't connect to our partner our brain goes into panic right that makes them anxious and the other way of dealing with it which is very negative is to get freaked out and say " I'll make you respond to me. I'll criticize you I'll demand I'll say why don't u talk to me more. You never talk to me you know I can't remember when you used to talk to me but now. Of course the terrible thing about that is actually the person who is saying that the hidden message is won't u come and be with me? Unfortunately, the other person hears I am dangerous I'm gonna b critical of you

Chip August: Right

Sue Johnson: and the other person moves away and we get stuck. we get stuck in what I call demon dialogues. The most popular one of all which in the research says leads very predictably to divorce is that u have two people losing the connection between them and one person starts protesting and complaining. Unfortunately they don't usually say " Gii, I'm feeling so lonely where are you? I'd really to be closer". They say things like "We never go out anymore and how come u don't ". So one person starts protesting and complaining and the other person moves away. He says "OH! I can't deal with this; I don't know what to say. I can never please her" Moves away and shuts down. The more he moves away and shuts down the angrier she gets the more she demands and what they're demanding what they're doing sort of almost becomes a hidden game. They stop to focus on the ball running between them and they lose total sense of the game. The demon dialogue takes over their relationship and creates more and more distance to the point where they're all so sick of each other and then that's when you hear people say things like "Oh! Well that's just the way marriage is you know after three or four years with the kids and with chores you know we don't talk anymore and when we do talk we fight and that's the way marriage is". When u listen to them they'll describe this kind of demon dialogue umm and people just sort of think this is the way it is. It's not the way it is. It's what happens when u don't know how to create this safe emotional connection and take care of it.

Chip August: And your *Seven Conversations* kind of start there. You start with really noticing these demon dialogues really seeing them for what they

are naming them and just starting to learn how to speak the conversation that they're masking?

Sue Johnson: That's right and you know umm it's really amazing when people start to realize that the partner isn't the enemy, the partner isn't desperately trying to hurt their feelings or totally called uncaring, the partner is hurting just as much as they are and both of them are caught up in this terrible dance. People have different words for it. One couple I'm working with they call it the nothing. It leads them to nothing

Chip August: right

Sue Johnson: there's nothing between them and the way it goes is she gets upset and starts to seize and she withdraws. She stops talking to him, she goes away. Now they've been doing this for 30 years you understand. She goes away and he picks up the tension and he really gets freaked by it right. He knows that she is not talking to him so he goes and he says to her "What? What's wrong?" and she says because she is quite intimidated by him she is quite unsure of herself she doesn't know what to say, she doesn't really understand what's going on with her so she says " Nothing" and he says " what are u talking about? Why wont u talk to me?" and he gets stronger and bigger and heavier and more critical and she is Oh my god I can't please this man, I just wanna run away from here. So she says nothing, nothing and then they get totally frustrated and they don't talk to each other for days. So they call it The Nothing and when they can start to understand how the nothing has actually taken over their relationship at various times for 30 years and really destroyed a lot of their love and trust for each other, they can come together and start realizing that this pattern, this demon dialogue deliberately called the demon comes in this big black things comes in and takes over right. So it's like demon dialogue that comes in and takes over. The trouble with it is its not painful when its happening it destroys people's sense of safety and connection with their partner so then when they do really need something you know and when they do need comfort and security they have a very hard time turning to their partners and asking for it so that's also why we call it a demon because it sort of destroys the good part of a relationship you know

Chip August: And then from that place you begin you have couples find the raw spots go back and look at moments when they couldn't connect and rethink and re-talk through those moments and you kind of lead people through a whole sequence...

Sue Johnson: Yes and we lead them to a key conversation. The conversation we deal from our years of research we realize umm that when we're doing EFT you know we would see people be able to have the not just step out of the negative conversations but start to have this very positive conversations and we would see that when they could do this and create this

emotional responsiveness with each other that they would get better and they would be better years later when we tested them for a follow up. So we started to understand how important these conversations are and they're really bonding conversations. There're conversations where once you have been able to step out of the demon dialogue and create this safe place to stand in your relationship once you, you know really understand your partner really isn't the enemy. Um people are able to turn and talk about the fears that they have because you know in a love relationship we're wander able there is no way around that. Even Floyd said "*to love is to be wander able*". Ok so people start to be able to turn and to confide the fears they have and ask for what they need if you're really safe and connected from their partner and when you can do it that way, it you know people find it actually rewarding...

Chip August: yeah

Sue Johnson: People like to be needed. They like to, once they know what the other person needs from them and they don't get anxious they can say well you know of course I love it when you turn and ask me you're so important to me and I just want you to hold me for a minute because I'm anxious about tomorrow. People like it. So people start to be able to talk about their needs in a whole new way and reach for each other and pull each other close and when they can do that all kinds of things just fall into place. They're able to talk about their sexuality differently, they're able to look at any injuries if you had in a relationship and create forgiveness you know once you can have that kind of bonding conversation you can reach for each other you know you can do that. I think the relationship is on a whole new footing.

Chip August: Well you know you're back to you've established real love in this in the definition of love that is that attachment and that connection and that real heart to heart meeting

Sue Johnson: That is

Chip August: we need to pause for a moment. So we're gonna take a short break.....umm in this break listeners I just wanna remind you if you just heard something Sue said or I said that you thought Wow I gotta send that to my husband or I gotta send that to my wife, we do put up transcripts up of most of the shows and if u go to the episode pages of Sex, Love and Intimacy at personallifemedia.com if you go to my episode pages you will find this episode and a transcript and why don't cut paste and send it to somebody. When we come back Dr. Johnson has an exercise which we can try at home but right now we're gonna go for a short commercial break. We'll be right back

Chip August: Welcome back to Sex, Love and Intimacy. I'm your host Chip August. We're talking to Dr. Sue Johnson. She's the author of a particularly nice book that I like called Hold me Tight, seven Conversations for a lifetime

of love. When we left we were kind of talking about these conversations where they lead and I need to ask this just cos I'm a guy and Emotionally Focused Therapy as soon as I see the word emotionally focused there is a part of me that wonders isn't this really a women thing you know as a man....

Sue Johnson: No no no no nooo. No no Chip its not. We do emotionally focus with vets, we've worked with the US army where people have come back from Iraq, we do emotionally focus with the firemen of New York. We in fact, my work has been used a lot with couples who are facing trauma that's one of my specialties. I mean we do emotionally focus with not just with guys and guys really like it because we teach them the logic of their emotions and we teach them what their partners do need and what they need and empower them to talk about their emotions, we help them understand what love is about which is what they really want. They want a manual you know... hahaha and we sort of give them one

Chip August: yeah

Sue Johnson: And also we work with guys who for their job in their job they have to really shut down emotions in order to you know you can't be deep in your emotions when you're fighting a fire... but

Chip August: Right

Sue Johnson: So they have to be able to do that for their jobs. But the trouble is if they try to live their lives in that shut down state nobody can you know they're all alone and they get overwhelmed by stress and tons of those things. So I experience and also the research says that men like this approach and I think they like it because its really focusing on people's experience its u don't have to learn all types of communication skills and then try to put them into place when you don't feel like your communication skills. You know men like the sort of concreteness of it and research says that we are very successful with men who their wives call inexpressive ok. We don't have any problems you know we do this with truckers and we do this with intelligence officers in the US army and within nested men. Its just the word emotion that takes guy out ...(laughs)

Chip August: just a little bit u know I lead works up in sex and intimacy and it doesn't freak me out but I also I'm a guy and I'm sensitive to the feeling women tell me that I don't really understand emotion really what so. The thing I was struck by this is the ... its not that men don't want to have sex, most men certainly have being human is to be sexual but, but I just noticed what your book was a space to really talk about and be present to the part of sex which really is about being held and taking the barriers away from between of us and its really about that cocoon space we create for each other that's precious. That most men don't have word for.

Sue Johnson: Yes and I think that's a really good point. I think one of the saddest points in a relationship is the only way men usually know how to ask

that kind of connection, comfort, closeness, touch is to make love and unfortunately when people aren't really feeling safe and reconnected the woman hears I want an orgasm, I want the sexual experience and in fact often what men tell us what men have been telling me 30 years. I just don't want an orgasm. I want to feel desired. I want to feel held, I want to feel close. But they don't know how to ask for those things. Those things feel wimpy and actually our society has tortured that we're not suppose to have those closeness needs of connection reassurance where people feel ashamed of them especially men...

Chip August: Yes

Sue Johnson: they're not suppose to have this. They're the most natural things in the world. They're the source of strength but guys don't know how to ask for those so they say " lets make love" and you know the woman says you just want to screw.

Chip August: Right

Sue Johnson: And its disconnected. Its awful you know we help men talk about their and I say things like you know what if I was a man in North America who never got touched unless I go and play rugby when guys are slamming into me as fast as they can or I call it football.... (laughs)

Chip August: Rugby, football, basketball they all have their quality

Sue Johnson: So I tried but if u take that away where in our society do men get touched? You know stroked, held connected with that kind of physical level. Only one place in the bed of the woman. You know woman touch each other more. They touch their children more umm but I think there's a piece in the book on sex. You know I talked about three kind of sex and how if u want to spend love suddenly you look at sex on a whole different light you know and sex is not just about procreation and its nor just about lust

Chip August: Right

Sue Johnson: If James bond is , now that's one dimensional sex you know that's umm....

Chip August: you know even the latest James bond you talk about is solid sex. The name of the latest James Bond is Quantum of Solace and even he turns out that he has feelings and needs and desires....

Sue Johnson: no, James Bond having feelings what has the world come to

Chip August: Yes (laughs)

Chip August: you know when you were saying how men are. One of the things I really love is the time that I live in is that more and more my male friends we hug you know its nothing for us to put an arm around each other.

Its that fortunately the loudest tap was about men just being brothers with each other and is evaporating...

Sue Johnson: Yes

Chip August: .. It is better then its ever been before, you see this u know. You see this on the football field they hug each other. You know you see this is rugby they hug each other

Sue Johnson: Right and ironically cos u also see this with the army guys

Chip August: Yup

Sue Johnson: you know when u've faced an upcoming missile together or watched one of your buddies die , no matter how much macho training you've been given the pure humanness comes to the core

Chip August: Yeah **Sue Johnson:** And you hold each other right you hang on and u hold each other. You comfort each other and one of the problem in military marriages is often these guys feel you know they save the dragon together and they feel more connected to their bodies then they come home and they're totally different from when they left. And then they meet this lady who looks like a stranger to then and she is their wife...

Chip August: Yeah

Sue Johnson: She is.. They don't even know how to translate what they've been through in the last year into this, into being with this woman. We really need to help them. I think its really important to help our soldiers umm hang on to their families and create families and relationships where they can heal ...

Chip August: Yeah

Sue Johnson: and the stuff that they've been through

Chip August: You're wonderful to talk to and we could just go on and on and on but starting to run out of time here. If , if my listeners want to get your book and get in touch with you what's the best way?

Sue Johnson: Ooo, well its easy to get the book. The easiest is just get it on Amazon and that's really easy to get. You can look there are lots of resources on the website which is www.holdmetight.net you can go on and you can watch me talking and file for consulting on that website and you can also get to me through the international centre. Umm and the email there if u like it [ocfi@magma .ca](mailto:ocfi@magma.ca) and that ca is for Canada and that's up here in the ice and snow

(laughs)

Sue Johnson: we're now about 30 below and I heard its going down to 45.

Chip August: ooo so sorry I don't know if I should tell you this or not but I'm sitting in Northern California where it is....55 degrees or so

Sue Johnson: No I'm not going to thank you although must say I do come to California a lot and you live in a very very beautiful part of the world

Chip August: I'm blessed, I'm very blessed. Listeners we'll put those links on the website so if you visit the website you can find links to Dr. Johnson's work here. I'd like to leave my listeners with an exercise or something they can do at home that could increase the Love or intimacy or sexuality in their life. Ummm you got anything in mind?

Sue Johnson: Well, there are lots of exercises in the book to try but I guess maybe one thing that I suggest people could do is that sometimes we totally leave this dimension of closeness and bonding out of our relationship we get so caught up and being a team around our kids that we just forget to put it in all together and what I try to do is get people to think about and not just think about the negative patterns they get caught into but maybe sit down and share with each other the last time that they felt really close and when they were able to turn to their partners and ask their partners for what they needed and their partner responded in a way that helped them hold and strong and important and precious and really tell them what their partner did to make them feel that way so that sometimes we need to know the negative impacts we have on our partner but we also need to know the huge positive impact we can have on our partner .

Chip August: Yeah

Sue Johnson: And I think sometimes we miss that so I encourage people to do that and to think about a time when they were able to ask what they needed and their partner really came in and was really there for them and all the wonderful things that came out of that. So then I think people start to understand how precious they are to their spouse and how much they have to give. And guys, guys say she needs me to problem solve , she needs me to go out and you know solve this problem and solve that problem ironically is that's what their wife need. Their wife needs them..

Chip August: Right. Presence and attention

Sue Johnson: wife needs them to turn and say " Hi sweety I think you're doing well you know, you're the person I wanna be with. You're precious to me and if you're going through a hard time you're strong enough." That's what the wife need. Not for a guy to say to solve this problem for you so anyway it was great fun to talk to you.

Chip August: and great fun to talk to you. That sounds like a great exercise. I think you just gave a lot of couples a very sweet moment to share with each other. Umm thanks for coming to the show you were very informative

Sue Johnson: you're very welcome

Chip August: Listeners thank you for listening. This brings us to the end of another episode of Sex, Love and Intimacy I hope u enjoyed it and I hope you'll join us again. Thank you. That is it.

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