

Chapter 7

Attachment

The way we relate to a loved one is very individual. We enter relationship with different needs and expectations, different experiences of how it is to love and be loved. Some of these attitudes are extremely beneficial: sharing, forgiving, affection. Others attitudes and reactions are unhelpful and even destructive: holding resentment, being selfish and stingy with affection. Why is there so much variation in the way individuals approach relationship? Why is relating easier for some people and more difficult for others?

In the literature, the way we connect to the special person in our lives is called *attachment*. Originally, attachment theory was developed in psychological studies to describe and explain the different ways babies respond and connect to their mothers. More recently, attachment theory has been expanded to help us understand adult relationships.

Attachment Styles

Our styles of attachment develop early in childhood from a complicated mix of nature and nurture. We came into the world with distinct temperaments, predispositions to respond to nurturing in our own particular ways. Some of us were sensitive babies, easily upset by changes in routine; others were robust and easy to settle. Some were calm and alert, while others were fussy and distractible.

Differences in our natures became the foundation on which our particular attachment styles developed. Initial tendencies were shaped, modified and often distorted by events and experiences as we grew up. How did that happen?

Babies are born instinctually ready to bond with their caregiver, usually their mother. They have an innate and insistent need to be taken care of. Every newborn is predisposed to focus their eyes on mother's eyes when cradled in her arms, to respond to the touch and smell of her skin. We all come into the world prepared for our parents to meet us, to feed us and to care for our individual needs.

Infants do not understand that caregivers may be distracted or unavailable, or that the world is not perfectly attuned to them. When they are hungry, lonely or unsettled, babies cry from a desperate overpowering demand to have a caretaker be there immediately, if not sooner. When mother or someone else responds, that powerful drive for connection and soothing is satisfied and resolved. The baby settles physically and emotionally.

Good Enough Parenting

Children have many needs and no parent is perfect or can always respond precisely to the demands of their offspring. However, many parents are *good enough*—a term coined by the UK psychoanalyst, D.W. Winnicott. These parents do their best to adapt themselves and the nurturing situation to the unique requirements of each child. They draw on inner resources of love and selflessness to be the best caregivers they can be, and respond consistently to the ever-changing demands of the baby.

Good Enough Parenting

Baby Pete is Alice's second child. He is finicky and colicky and wants to feed at random times night and day. When he suckles, he attaches so strongly, Alice's breasts get sore. Nothing but feeding seems to calm him down.

Jessie, Alice's first baby, was easy. Jessie settled into a nice steady rhythm feeding every four hours. Alice is bummed that Pete is not more like Jessie but what can she do? She gets irritated with her scrawny, demanding son but when she sees his tiny fingers and smells his new baby smell, love wells up inside her.

Some nights the exhaustion is too much but she reminds herself that the broken sleep won't last forever. Thankfully, her husband, Larry sometimes takes a night shift with a bottle and she gets a break.

Larry is there when she needs him to listen to her complaints and help her feel better. They are hanging in together.

Being a good enough parent is demanding but it bears dividends. When a mother and father see and accept the individuality of their child and adapt accordingly, the child

thrives. There are enough satisfying childhood experiences to compensate for the inevitable frustrations and losses. The child grows up secure, loved and accepted. When attachment needs have mostly been taken care of, relating to others as adults is generally less complicated.

Occasional mismatches between the demands of the baby and the response of the caregiver are actually valuable. Every child has to tolerate frustration: parents cannot be there immediately to cater to every whim of their child, cannot always adapt perfectly. For the child, the ability to cope with inevitable disappointments develops naturally when overall parenting is consistent. Parents don't have to be perfect, just good enough.

Deficient Parenting

What happens if parental responses are not consistent or appropriate to a baby's needs? What if mother is depressed and can't cope? What if she and her husband are in conflict? What if the parents leave the infant to cry unattended or react to its cries with anger? Then at first baby wails louder and harder, giving a stronger signal of distress, hoping for a better response. When that does not work, baby has to adjust to a world in which feelings are not soothed and the need for connection is only sporadically satisfied. The baby accommodates to the painful reality of unmet needs.

Deficient Parenting

Keith and Wendy have been married for a year. They wed in a hurry because Wendy was pregnant with Melanie. The wedding was rushed and stressful. Everyone seemed to be whispering about Wendy's big tummy.

They set up house but money is tight. Keith has to work double shifts and often doesn't get home until late. He drinks with his mates after work to help relax. When Keith comes in the door, Wendy is waiting and they get into terrible fights, usually about money.

The birth was long and hard. Wendy is not sleeping well and it's hard to drag herself out of bed to make Melanie's bottle in the night. She feels worn out and often thinks, "Maybe I'm not cut out to be a mother. Maybe this is all a mistake."

Luckily, Melanie is a placid baby who seldom cries. She seems content to be left in her crib for hours sucking on her fingers.

One of the results of unpredictable and insufficient nurturing is a sense of loss and resignation. The child develops an inner conviction that close relationships are painful and unreliable. Beneath the grief and resignation, the unmet needs remain hungry, craving fulfillment; hope always seems to lead to disappointment. Relationships are complicated.

For most of us, our parenting was mixed—sometimes good enough and other times less than ideal. This may be because our parents, father and mother had different capacities to care and nurture. Most of our parents had the intention to do their best, but they were seldom well parented themselves. They carried their unmet attachment needs, their psychological flaws into marriage and acted them out in their relationship with their children.

A growing child's needs are myriad and ever changing. Most mothers and fathers do their best to meet them appropriately—but often fall short. Each child is different and requires different parenting; many parents just do not have the personality, skills or understanding to do a great job. In almost every case, we grow up with particular deficits: our parents did not tune in to us well enough, did not respond appropriately, were often distracted and stressed. We are all left with some unmet needs that crave attention and fulfillment.

Dependency Needs

What then are our basic needs and what happens if those needs are not properly met? Firstly we have to be nurtured, not just with food but also with tenderness and love. To feel settled, we need to feel safe and secure, soothed and comforted when we are upset or uncomfortable. For our minds to develop properly we need sensory and mental stimulation; we have to have encouragement to engage with people and the world. As we become separate individuals, we need to be seen and understood for who we are. All these needs overlap and entwine so it is hard to separate them out—but when they are unmet they tend to rear their heads and powerfully influence the quality of adult relationships.

There is no one-to-one relationship between parenting style and psychological outcome in adulthood—but there are recognizable patterns. In general, unmet needs for nurturing as a

child are experienced in adulthood as a sense of neediness, a desperate desire for attention and love. This often shows itself in 'clingy,' appeasing behaviors, fears of being rejected and a tendency towards depression.

Alternatively, if as a child we felt rejected, left alone or not responded to sufficiently, then as an adult we may have an over-developed sense of independence and self-sufficiency. In those cases, being needy is too dangerous and disturbing, so unmet needs are suppressed and hidden. This person tends to fend off attachments and dislike emotions.

In chaotic and unpredictable families in which the child felt constantly uneasy or unsafe, similar feelings continue into adulthood in the form of anxiety, vigilance and a need for security. These individuals find it hard to relax and may compensate by being over active and constantly trying to get things under control.

If we were not soothed and comforted as infants, we may not learn to soothe our selves. Then we have trouble calming down. Emotions feel overwhelming and uncontrollable: outbursts of anger, debilitating anxiety, depths of sadness. Unable to self-soothe, we look to external things to make us feel better: sex, alcohol, over-eating, over-exercising. Many addictions are misguided attempts to find a little consolation and comfort.

What happens if we were not helped to engage with the world? Lack of stimulation at critical periods of child development makes it harder for us to concentrate and learn. When we are not encouraged and challenged appropriately, we become vulnerable to self-doubt, poor motivation and even a sense of aimlessness. Many of us lost faith in our natural creative and artistic abilities because we were criticized or discouraged at an early age.

Developing our Sense of Self

As babies, we began to know who we were through interactions with our caregivers and family. Hopefully, our parents spent time gazing into our eyes, babbling and making baby sounds, smiling when we smiled. These loving, speechless conversations made us feel recognized and appreciated as separate, unique individuals. We learned who we are, by being seen and interacted with.

Attention from our original family—and later from our peers—is the ground out of which our individuality, our sense of self grows. To be loved assures us that we are valuable. To be ignored makes us feel invisible, to doubt that we exist. The anguish of not being responded to leaves an underlying sense of self-doubt and uncertainty. In an adult relationship, when either partner is insecure or self-doubting, communication gets fraught with pitfalls, projection is rife and interactions get tangled.

Our parents made mistakes: did not always respond to us in the right way, did not consistently adapt to our needs or nature. Maybe they could not understand who we were; maybe they were too engrossed in their own complicated lives. Whatever the reasons, many parents were not quite good enough. We are flawed in relationship because our parents were flawed as caregivers. Does that mean our problems are their fault? Not really. They themselves were the product of even more flawed parenting—and so the fault stretches back into history.

As we grew up, we modified our internal worlds to cope with the style of parenting and the pattern of relationships in our family. Day by day, our attachment needs were sometimes satisfied and often frustrated. Out of thousands of both helpful and deficient interactions, we built our attachment styles. By the time we started dating, our ways of attaching and relating to others had become deeply ingrained—automatic and unconscious.

Now it is our responsibility to resolve our unmet needs and deal with our own instability and reactivity. The good news is that through a loving relationship we become more aware and allow love to heal the old wounds of childhood. We can recognize what we have to change and accept that our partners can help us become the person we are meant to be. Relationship is the path to wholeness.

Summary

- Our styles of attachment develop early in childhood from a complicated mix of nature and nurture.
- Many parents are *good enough* and adapt themselves and the nurturing situation to the unique needs of each child.

- Deficient parenting where nurturing is insufficient, inappropriate and inconsistent leads to unmet attachment and dependency needs.
- Lack of appropriate attention from our original family creates a fragile sense of self and underlying feelings of self-doubt and uncertainty.
- A loving relationship has the potential to resolve unmet needs and strengthen our sense of self.

Practice

Think about the following questions. Jot down notes of your answers.

- Did I feel loved, cared-for and accepted as a small child? Who seemed to love me most?
- Did I feel that one or both of my parents did not understand or care for me?
- What was most difficult for me growing up? Who was there to help me?
- What struggles and vulnerabilities has my childhood left me with?
- How do these vulnerabilities impact how I am in my relationship?"

Have a conversation with your partner.

- Share insights from the questions above.
- Share details of two important and difficult experiences from your childhood. Describe how your parents reacted and how you wish they might have responded.