

Attachments – *Life’s Connections* (part 1 of a series)

Many people these days build homes. I have had the opportunity to observe houses being built. Home construction is a fascinating process to observe as there are various essential steps that go into putting up a house. The contractor must be very careful to have a foundation that is level and secure. If there is a faulty foundation, then the house will ultimately be impacted by the imperfect foundation. Ground must be level, smooth, and solid. The slightest problem with the base can directly inhibit the rest of the building process. A proficient contractor is very cautious in this beginning phase, being aware of the slightest detail. The owner of a house with an unbalanced foundation will be in for a lot of work, worry, and expense. Similarly, when our bonds are not secure we are in for a lot of pain and distress.

According to Daniel Siegel, *attachment is an inborn system in the brain that evolves in ways that influence and organize motivational, emotional, and memory processes with respect to significant caregivers. The attachment system motivates an infant to seek proximity to parents and to establish communication with them.*¹ Attachments are imperative for a child to seek out mom and dad for comfort, love, joy, and strong emotional/mental health. Attachments are foundational for organizing a healthy internal state of mind and for relationships to prosper. A secure attachment is one where parents attune, or are sensitive to the child’s needs while insecure attachments are when the parents fail to remain sensitive at meeting needs. Attachments are selective; only certain people will do when the infant seeks to bond. Bonds form security for the infant that will be needed as he/she grows older and develops an independent and group identity.

By eighteen months, a child develops “evocative memory”. This is a form of remembering through the image of faces, voice tone, smell, taste, and touch.² Evocative memory is an internalized image in the memory, which brings comfort and security for the child if mom is unavailable. Life giving interaction takes a healthy mom who can be sensitive to the child’s needs when it is time to build joy and when it is time to rest. Early years are a fragile time for the infant. If mom pushes joy building when the infant needs to rest, the experience becomes overwhelming and traumatizing. Mom needs to be sensitive to what the baby desires, and what the baby does not need. The ability to differentiate the two energy states strengthens the child’s mind, builds and equips the emotional center. The right hemispheric control center needs to be strong for all the roads an individual will travel, and emotions the child will confront. The more practice, the better the child will be at regulating emotions and staying relational in distress.

There will be no greater pain for a child who is met with a parent who is unresponsive to the child’s needs and fails to respond when the child requires connecting. Neglect, the absence of a connection, is experienced as a “death”, and the child will probably spend the rest of his/her life trying to avoid, mask, or numb the pain. This child may experience relationships as anything but fun, exciting and enjoyable. People may become a means to an end, objects of pain/pleasure, or bristles on a fragile wound.

¹ Developing Mind, pg. 67

² Developing Mind, pg. 71

Attachment pain can be the cause for addictions, compulsions, disorders, and a number of other symptoms and problems. Attachment pain can instigate affairs, divorces, drug/alcohol abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse, and many other disastrous situations. Oftentimes attachment pain goes unnoticed, unrecognized, or mis-diagnosed.

Attachments – *Life's Connections* (part 2 of a series)

Last issue we learned the basics of why attachments are significant. Attachments are the necessary building blocks for our lives. Attachments are the foundation for emotional and mental well being and interpersonal interaction. How we grow and mature is based on the quality of our bonds. Without an attachment foundation built on consistent, healthy interaction, our emotional well-being and mental health will suffer. According to Daniel Siegel, *for the infant and young child, attachment relationships are the major environmental factors that shape the development of the brain during its period of maximal growth.*³ Attachments are essential in helping an infant brain develop and function. Bonding and attachments develop relationships, establish its own circuit within the brain, build an internal interpreter, gain capacity to synchronize with others and allow for repair of broken attachments. Secure bonds enable these processes to properly take place.

Healthy bonds and attachments establish the foundation for our relationships. It is impossible to have healthy, meaningful relationships without mutual bonds between people. A relationship is based on attuning and communicating with one another verbally and nonverbally in a dance of shared signals. Bonding between mother and child involves a specific sensitivity to signals. For the infant brain, there is a time to play and a time to rest. Disruption of these cycles produces devastating results. A mother's role in bonding with her child is to synchronize with the child's various states, depending on what the child needs at a given time. A child who wakes up from a nap will need mom to be sensitive to his/her mental state and energy level. A healthy mother will be quiet, gentle, and soothing in her voice, until baby has lightened up the senses and is ready to play. The mother who is not sensitive to the child's condition may overwhelm and upset the child by reflecting *her* condition upon the child. When mom fails to recognize her child's attachment light is on, the child experiences rejection. This misalignment creates immense distress in the child. Now this awful experience, a "death" feeling will be avoided. Sadly, the "death" state corresponds with rest states, so the child avoids rest. The insecure attachment feeling will haunt the child until the day comes when the individual is healthy and secure enough to work through attachment pain. In the meantime, attachment pain goes unchecked while rest states are avoided. Agonizing attachment pain is often covered up and disregarded as much as possible. Since the attachment circuit is below the cortex of the brain, or below consciousness and will, recognizing attachment pain takes learning, detection and practice later in life. The mother who desynchronizes with her child produces serious damage to her child's attachment circuit. Insecure attachments form when parents and children fail to

³ Developing Mind, pg. 85

synchronize. Insecure attachments are associated with a higher incidence of psychiatric disorders, including anxiety and mood disorders.⁴

A secure attachment forms through plenty of synchronized interaction between mother and child. This strong bond grows when mom responds to her child's signals in timely fashion. Mom synchronizes with child, builds joy and provides rest at the appropriate times. Mom downloads her brain structure and mental state as well as enhances baby's emotional regulation ability through shared attunement. Shared attunement is the alignment of states of mind between mother and child. Attunement is expressed through facial expressions, tone of voice, body gestures and eye contact.⁵ Joy is produced when mom's face lights up, expressing *I am delighted to be with you!* Joyful exchanges establish a secure bond with baby that will travel a lifetime. As child reaches full capacity of joy, she will look away, or gaze avert. Breaking eye contact stops right hemispheric communication and says, 'let's rest!' Healthy mothering understands this need for rest, and will respect the need. Unhealthy mothering results when mom fails to recognize her child's need for rest and continues pushing *her* state onto the baby. This happens if mother feels rejected by baby's action so she pushes even harder to keep baby's attention. The continued pushing causes overwhelm to baby's attachment circuits that can lead to dissociation at the most and a painful disconnection at the least. Mom's capacity surpasses that of her infant. Trying to compete with mom's high energy levels only creates overwhelm and an internal crisis.

Secure bonds provide an infant with a solid foundation to build joy and experience intense emotions. Both are important for the infant to practice. A secure bond with mom provides well needed strength and safety to experience bonds with others. As the child grows older, dad becomes a prime candidate for the baby to synchronize with. Dad helps expand the child's capacity to synchronize with others beside mom. However, in the beginning mom is essential to provide a foundation and framework the child requires throughout life. Shared attunement develops a secure foundation for interpersonal relationships and emotional health. Synchronizing builds strong bonds, a house that can withstand life's storms and turbulence.

Attachments – *Life's Connections* (part 3 of a series)

In the last article we examined the significance of strong bonds and healthy attachments. To review, secure attachments form when mom synchronizes with her child. A strong bond develops when mom is sensitive to her child's signals. Mom synchronizes with child as she builds joy and allows rest as her child requires. Synchronization involves reciprocated rhythms. Synchronization between mother and child match mental states, energy levels, and alternate between periods of arousal and rest. Healthy mothers synchronize to baby, while unhealthy mothers attempt to get baby to synchronize with mother's need.

⁴ Developing Mind, pg 86

⁵ Developing Mind, pg 85, 86, 88

Problems arise when mom fails to respond correctly to her child's attachment light (cues and signals). We call these problems attachment disorders. They produce attachment pain. A bond which fails to grow in love and security becomes an insecure attachment, a fear bond. The insecure attachment we are going to look at is called a dismissive attachment. We feel like we are going to die when someone fails to respond to us at a moment we are primed and ready to bond. Our hearts race, thoughts become confused and we hurt. We sink into an abyss of turmoil and anguish when we want to be with someone and our signals are not reciprocated. An **avoidant/dismissive attachment** describes pain resulting from failure of our familiar face to respond and synchronize to us. Children fall prey to a dismissive attachment when the parent or caregiver has not properly responded (if at all) with good timing. This distorted existence does not recover well and a child learns to mask attachment pain by hiding attachment cues and signals. Child's light comes on; the parent's light is off. When a child's light goes off, parent's light is still off which produces an avoidant outcome.

Dismissive parents produce dismissive children, who grow up and rear dismissive children. Dismissive attachments develop into a vicious cycle. Children realize their attachment light has a mind of its own, beyond their control, so they disconnect upper levels and lower levels of their mind from working together. We call this a desynchronized mind. Keeping a split control center brings temporary relief and avoidance of attachment pain. Up until age 12 children are not good at doing this disconnection so they exhibit dissociative symptoms when they experience attachment pain. After 12 years of age the brain will run two systems of their control center separately, avoiding pain. Attachment pain will be masked under a variety of coping mechanisms. Recognition must be learned. It takes practice to recognize the feeling "*I am going to die if I don't get this...*" Addictions and compulsions develop from failures to correctly attune with relational rhythms.

An internal reaction exists for a dismissive child, yet children learn to hide their attachment light and desire to bond. Research shows dismissive children have similar internal reactions as a secure attached child. In both cases, heart rate leaps by an internal positive reaction upon recognition of a familiar face - yet dismissive attached children show no external visible reactions of interest.⁶ Sadly, dismissive children learn to play alone and oftentimes are labeled "mature" and "well behaved" in boarding schools and other child behavior programs.

Attachments – Life's Connections (part 4 of a series)

Previously we examined the significance of strong bonds and healthy attachments. Specifically in the last attachment article we explored what happens when a bond turns fear based, known as an avoidant/dismissive attachment. Unlike secure bonds which develop when attachment signals are shared in a timely fashion, insecure bonds develop through bad timing and missed signals. We develop an avoidant/dismissive attachment when mom or caregiver fails to respond correctly to our attachment light

⁶ Developing Mind, pg 92

(cues and signals). Pain arises and we feel we are about to die when our attachment light fails to provoke a response. Lonely and afraid, we suffer tremendous pain that resounds throughout our body, telling us we are going to die when our signals are not met and shared. A child whose signals are not reciprocated learns to mask attachment pain by hiding attachment cues and signals. A child's light comes on; the parent's light is off. When a child's light goes off, parent's light is still off, producing an avoidant outcome. Dismissive parents produce dismissive children, who grow up and rear dismissive children. We hurt when our familiar face fails to synchronize and respond with us.

Let us explore another form of insecure attachment, known as an **ambivalent/distracted attachment**. Unlike dismissive attachment, which forms by a failure of parent to respond, ambivalent/distracted attachments develop through mom imposing her mental state onto her child's state. On the surface, the interaction looks healthy and secure. Careful observation reveals a failure to synchronize. In other words, mom does not synchronize to child's needs, rather mom pushes child to synchronize with her needs. Let's look at an example. Child may be playing with toys (attachment light off) and insecure mother wants someone to bond with (attachment light on). She looks at her child, who seems distracted and busily playing. Mom comes over and joyfully picks up her child. This move interrupts the child's behavior. Mom plays, tickles and interacts with child. The interaction looks good, sounds good and may even be enjoyable to watch. For the infant, however the effects are harmful.

A distorted existence develops for the child because mom failed to attune to her child. Mom's intrusion pushed *her* mental state onto child's mental state, thus producing disarray for her child's attachment center. Failure to match attachment lights with her child results in confusion and attachment pain for her child. Now, child's attachment light will always be ready, and stay on, resulting in an ambivalent/distracted attachment. Ambivalent children take care of parents' feelings rather than parents taking care of children's feelings. Children feel responsible and must always be available and on guard for mom and dad. Time to bond becomes uncertain, signals are not synchronized and child never knows when signals will be met on time, so his/her light stays on. Developing from this unhealthy dynamic is a "parentified child", one who feels responsible for parents, and never knows time to quiet from time to play. This child becomes vigilant. Not wanting to miss an opportunity, child prepares to bond at any given moment. An inconsistent parent produces a confused child. Child's attachment center never knows when parent's light will be on or off and will leave his/her light on just in case parent responds.

Research studies with 18 month-old infants show most intrusions by a parent are positive in nature. Positive in the sense that parent wants to play or interact positively – according to parental need, not child. Untimely interaction produces clingy children who are confused and have to guess when mom or dad will be prepared to bond and connect again. Not wanting *to miss out on something good* becomes the child's primary motivation. A child is stuck unable to discern time to bond from time to rest. This produces highly sensitive and over vigilant children. Ambivalent/distracted children become clingy, beg for mom's attention and are not easily soothed when upset.

Attachments – *Life's Connections* (part 5 of a series)

In grade school, I used to love watching my peers play jump rope. Two girls held each end of a long rope then quickly flung the rope around. A brave volunteer would leap into the middle and pace with the rope, quickly jumping up and down. Those with good timing succeeded, those who did not have good timing got tangled up. The rhythmic pace would dance along smoothly, as long as they were all synchronized in unison. When one fell out of rhythm, the rope would get caught and quickly stop. Attachments build and develop based on good timing, shared signals, and synchronized interaction. We become skilled at jumping rope through practice, good timing and keeping rhythm with the rope and our teammates. We bond to our important people in similar fashion. Together, we keep our rhythms synchronized, internally and externally, while keeping our timing balanced and signals attuned. We become tangled up when someone gets out of step with our natural synchronized progression of interaction.

To review, we previously studied ambivalent/distracted attachments. We learned how this insecure attachment develops by mother's mental state being imposed onto her child. Children who develop ambivalent/distracted attachments feel responsible to take care of mom (or dad); what attachment literature calls a "parentified child". Interaction between an ambivalent mother and her child may look healthy and secure to the untrained eye, but a close examination between mother and child interaction reveals mom is desynchronized to child. The parent fails to respond properly to child's attachment light. In other words, mom does not synchronize with child's needs, rather mom pushes child to synchronize to her needs. We looked at an example where child plays alone. Child's attention focuses on his/her toys (attachment light off) and insecure mother wants someone to bond with (attachment light on). She looks at her child, who seems distracted and busily playing. Mom comes over and joyfully picks up her child, interrupting child's focus and behavior. Mom plays, tickles and interacts with child. The interaction looks good, sounds good and may even be enjoyable to watch. For the infant, however the effect is toxic and leads to an insecure attachment we know as ambivalent/distracted. Mom failed to stay sensitive to child's signals. If she would have given her child a few seconds, or minutes until the child looked up to mom, (attachment light on), then mom could have picked up child and played.

Let us take a look at our last attachment disorder, what is called a **disorganized attachment**. An individual with this attachment disorder has the highest percentage of risk for a mental disorder later in life.⁷ Disorganized attachments find their signature in more mental and post traumatic stress disorder cases than our previous two insecure attachments. Disorganized attachments occur when a parent becomes a source of terror as well as love and affection. Desire to attach and bond becomes a double bind because a child cannot decipher whether bonding will be safe or scary. Threat of being hurt, scared or abused overlaps the desire to approach, causing a guessing game with high stakes. When a child has his/her attachment light on, it creates panic due to the lack of

⁷ Developing Mind, pg. 119

predictability created by the caregiver or parent. For example, when a child wants to bond with mom, child's attachment light comes on. Mom's attachment light is stuck in unpredictable patterns of (on/off/on/off, etc.) Mom leaves child stuck in a state of confusion and fear, not knowing where mom will be or how she will respond when the times comes to bond.

Studies show the disorganized child's response to parental recognition. The parent walks into a room with his/her disorganized child already in the room playing. The child then responds by walking or crawling backwards, towards the parent, not wanting to see mom or dad's face. A child may trance out, freeze or even crawl on the floor banging his or her head.⁸ Not all cases of disorganized attachment involve abuse. Surprisingly, the most common cause of disorganized attachment is not an angry parent. It may involve a "victim parent", a parent who is constantly afraid. A child who shares an identity with a fear mapped brain means sharing an identity with someone who is scared and fear bonded. Everything in the whole world becomes scary and frightening. A healthy parent gives assurance and comfort for a frightened child but a disorganized child receives fear and worry in return. A large source of fear in children develops from parents who are fearful.

According to Jim Wilder's groundbreaking book titled, *The Complete Guide to Living With Men*, he states, "three things can make a baby boy frightened of his own attachment light, when his attachment signals: 1) make mom angry sometimes, 2) lead to being overwhelmed at times, 3) when the baby can pick up how scared mom is. Under these three conditions when baby's attachment light comes *on* he fears pain and terror, desires closeness and comfort – but what will happen this time?"⁹ This pattern leaves the child in a state we recognize as disorganized. A disorganized child will have a painful life ahead with challenges in relationships and personal well being. Healing begins with authentic, honest, and consistent relationships that provide safety, predictability and security for the disorganized child.

In summary, we have examined the significance of life's invaluable connections - attachments and bonds. Secure attachments are foundational for emotional and mental well being and interpersonal interaction. How we grow and mature is based on our bonds. Synchronization between mother and infant build strong bonds and healthy attachments. Mom synchronizes with child by building joy and resting as her child needs. Synchronization involves reciprocated rhythms. Synchronization between mother and child match mental states, energy levels, and alternate between periods of arousal and rest. Healthy mothers synchronize to baby, while unhealthy mothers attempt to get baby to synchronize with her, based out of need.

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⁸ Developing Mind, pg. 74+

⁹ Wilder, Jim *The Complete Guide to Living With Men* pg. 40