

Lesson 1

What is Attachment?

*“The secret self
knows the
anguish of our
attachments and
assures us that
letting go of
what we think
we must have to
be happy is the
same as letting
go of our
unhappiness.”*

- Guy Finley

Attachment, Bonding and Temperament

Attachment is a deep and enduring physical and emotional bond that connects one person to another across time and space (Ainsworth, 1973; Bowlby, 1969). Attachment theory in psychology originates with the work of John Bowlby, who defined attachment as a “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings,” which is motivated by a need for physical proximity, includes appraisals of the primary caretaker’s availability, and is intended to stimulate “felt security” (Fonagy, 2001). Wallin (2007) identified three findings which he felt had “profound and fertile implications” for psychotherapy:

1. Attachment relationships are the key context for development.
2. Preverbal experience makes up the core of the developing self.
3. The stance of the self towards experience (a person’s innate predisposition or temperament) predicts attachment security better than the facts of personal history.

Bonding characterizes the nature of the emotional connection established between the child and the "other" he or she has attached him or herself to; usually whoever is established as the primary caregiver—often the mother. Feeding is the first collaborative effort in which both mother and child engage, thus it has a significant impact on the quality of the earliest bond formed. But an adequate exchange of nutrients alone does not a healthy emotional connection make. While Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs originally suggested food was our first and foremost priority on the road to self-actualization, Harry Harlow (who worked with Maslow) later determined contact-comfort and attachment to be primary when it comes to cognitive and emotional development, after conducting controversial social isolation experiments on infant monkeys.

Furthermore, Renee Spitz studied infants in orphanages that were adequately fed and held but failed to bond with their caretakers, which resulted in "a failure to thrive." Spitz thus determined *bonding* to be an important aspect of attachment, and a benchmark of development that allows for growth on all spectrums.

Temperament is a term used to describe a child's innate disposition, as evidenced by observable behaviors. Thomas and Chess et al. began the classic New York Longitudinal study in the early 1950s regarding infant temperament, by rating infants on nine temperamental characteristics. Ultimately, they found the infants fell into one of three major categories (1968):

1. The easy child
2. The spirited (or “difficult”) child
3. The shy (or “slow-to-warm-up”) child

They found these attributes to exist across cultures, and determined about 65% of children fell into one of these three categories (the rest had temperaments that were not so distinctly determined). Typically, when the temperaments of both the mother and child are “attuned” the bond will be a healthy and secure one, resulting in a secure attachment style (discussed in the next lesson).

When mother and child are mismatched in temperament, it can lead to difficulties in attachment and misperceptions of characterological “disturbances” in the child—a mistake, if unchecked, that could lead to actual disturbances, through *projected introjects*.

For example, if an introverted child is born into an extroverted family, he may be perceived as depressed and withdrawn. Similarly, if an excitable and physically active child is born into calm and more a sedentary family, he or she may be perceived as hyperactive and distractible. If the parents and family members deliver and reinforce (project) either of these depreciative messages (introjects) frequently enough, the child may come to identify with (internalize) these misinterpretations as his own truth. This creates a psychic dissonance between what self psychologists would describe as the “true self” and “false self,” leading to feelings of low self-esteem, anxiety and rigidity, meaninglessness and alienation, what is sometimes called a “narcissistic wound.” If left untreated, such disturbances can lead to significant obstacles in the realm of relationships, including insecure attachment styles (Mitchell & Black, 1995).

Evolving Attachment

What qualifies as an attachment “disturbance?”

Generally speaking, when a child receives such messages as “you make me proud,” “you make me angry,” or “don’t hurt your sister’s feelings,” he realizes the power he wields over others—including his more capable adult caretakers—and this is anxiety inducing. Equally, he realizes the opposite must be true: if he can make others feel something and act accordingly, then they can make him feel something and act accordingly as well. In this way, the child falls into blame games that quickly spiral into complicated relationships, fraught with tension and unresolved issues. He then carries those loose ends into other aspects of life, compounding his “unfinished business” (James and Friedman, 2009). Inevitably

the early drama will be played out again and again in relationships, like the same script read with new actors, each time.

The struggle for independence

In pursuit of attachment we are paradoxically driven towards a state of independence. Having blissfully enjoyed a sense of intimate “oneness” with our mothers (for about the first twelve to sixteen months of life), the advent of crawling and walking propel us towards a state of independence, a process Margaret Mahler called “separation individuation.” A child's state of feeling both distinct from and connected to its mother has a profound impact on all later relationships. If a child is fortunate, he will be able to make clear distinctions between himself and other people, maintaining flexible boundaries that he can open or close at will (Hendrix, 1988). Mahler suggested a child suffers greatly if this individuation process is not handled with care, leading to profound confusion about who one is: What is self and what is other? What is me and what is not me? Early arrestments in this time of life can make for a complicated and intensely painful relationships in adulthood, particularly for those that fall into the “anxious-avoidant trap.”

Intimacy and Attachment

Neufeld and Mate identify six “ways of attaching,” ascending from the more simplified to complex:

1. *Senses*. The emphasis is placed on physical proximity. A child needs to feel attached through smell, sight, sound, or touch.
2. *Sameness*. Usually in evidence by toddlerhood, the child seeks to be like those he or she feels closest to.
3. *Belonging and Loyalty*. To be close to someone is to feel possessive of him or her, and to be obedient and faithful to that person.
4. *Significance*. Needing to matter to the person we are closest to, and seeking to please him or her and win his or her approval.
5. *Feeling*. Marked by a seeking to be emotionally open and vulnerable with an attachment figure; a willingness to share one's feeling states.
6. *Being known*. Usually observable by the time a child enters school, this is when a child seeks to share his or her secrets and insecurities in the hopes of being completely seen, heard and embraced, in spite of them.

Essentially, Neufeld and Mate describe the dynamics of intimacy: the integration of both good and bad feelings—loving someone, even though they have disappointed you, and continuing to love yourself, when you have disappointed someone else—which allows for the vulnerable experience of more complex emotions, and enhance one's capacity to think and learn.

Exercise

Using the temperamental assessment attached to this lesson, determine your temperamental attunement between you and your early caretaker.