



The Deep Impact of Attachment

■ by Debi Mitchell, MS, LMFT

“To be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything.” ~Timothy Keller

Many years ago, I watched this TV series where best friends would refer to the other as “my person.” This has become a common way of referring to one with whom we have a strong emotional connection.

We all need a deep, safe emotional connection – our own person. British psychoanalyst John Bowlby called these deep emotional bonds “attachment.” Attachment begins developing at birth. Secure attachment exists when these bonds feel safe. Insecure attachment results as we learn to not trust those bonds. Our childhood attachment becomes the foundation for developing close adult relationships and practicing positive parenting.

Forming Childhood Attachments

A parent or caregiver will be a baby’s first attachment. They bond through loving, consistent responses to their physical and emotional needs. Babies need fed and diapered. They need comfort and hugs. Responding accurately matters greatly. When multiple caregivers exist, babies connect most with the person that spends time playing with, smiling at and talking to them.

From our first breath, every interaction builds or challenges that security. Consistency builds trust and a sense of safety. Inconsistencies challenge that security: trust erodes, and anxiety builds. Secure attachments help children form stronger friendships. Insecurely attached children become clingy and angry with or indifferent to their parents.

Picture a hill. We are born at the base, completely secure. We move up the hill as challenges outweigh our safety feelings. We climb from security to concern... to worry... to anxiety... to panic about trusting them. We move from panic into avoidant attachment. We become numb near the top. When we dissociate from relationships at the top, we don’t hurt because we don’t care.* We move back toward secure attachment as we regain our trust. As anxiety grows, so grows the difficulty regaining that trust. A relational trauma, like a parent’s sudden death, can forego the gradual process. This happens when the trauma outweighs our ability to cope. It becomes a constant relational fight-flight-freeze.

Developing Close Adult Relationships

As adults, we start where our childhood left off. We spend our lives ascending and descending that same attachment hill. The depth of our intimate adult relationships depends on our feelings of safety when developing them. Secure childhood attachment creates trusting adults with healthy self-esteem. We seek out someone with whom we connect closely, be it a spouse or best friend. Insecure attachment creates anxious adults with self-doubts. We either avoid or cling desperately to emotional bonds.

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Please understand that adult relationships will also move people up and down that hill. I counsel many people who were securely attached until their person, the one completely trusted, became abusive or unfaithful in some way. We need to identify and work through our relational anxieties. If we don't, we end up mistrusting one person because of another's behaviors. The work involved depends on multiple factors and is outside the scope of this article.

Tips for building deep, safe emotional bonds include:

- choosing a trustworthy person,
- growing the relationship slowly,
- accepting that all humans – even trustworthy ones – will fail sometimes,
- practicing forgiveness, and
- being trustworthy.

Practicing Positive Parenting

One area of positive parenting includes nurturing our children's secure attachment. We teach them to trust or distrust. We inform them if they are worthy or unworthy of love. Understanding security's base significantly aids our ability to raise emotionally healthy children. Just as we did, our children need:

- fed,
- clothed,
- kept clean and healthy,
- held,
- loving interaction/play, and
- consistency.

We can provide many of these while still being insecure ourselves. However, we must be able to connect deeply with them to fully provide their emotional needs. Children, especially babies, innately sense how much they are wanted and loved.

We can see the cycle: being parented to adult relationships to parenting. We learn to trust, develop a trusting relationship, and then instill that trust in our children. Likely, we'll develop some level of insecurity. We live in a broken world, so don't expect to stay at the bottom of the hill. Despite our brokenness, there is hope! It can be hard, but we can heal.

God plays an important role. Total security only comes when we don't need to fear another's failure. We can trust God to never fail us – to never leave us. We can know how much he wants to be with us when we remember his sacrifice on the cross, just so we can be with him. We can form deep emotional bonds with our person when we know God comforts us when those human failings pop up.

We know we will be okay, no matter what. ■

Footnotes

1. Attachment theory information is taken from "Attachment Theory" by Saul McLeod, Simply Psychology (<https://www.simplypsychology.org/attachment.html>).
2. *Sibcy, Gary, Polyvagal and Secure-base Attachment Theory. AACC World Conference. October, 2019.

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