

*Healthy Marriages, Relationships and Families:  
Interventions, Research and Policy Course*

# **Attachment Theory and Couple Relationships**



Week \_\_

*Promoting Child Welfare: Training Professionals to Support Healthy Marriages, Relationships and Families Project.*

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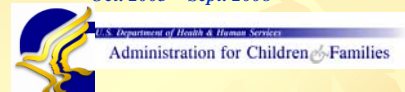
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*Project Mission: To develop curricula and provide training for students and professionals that enhance their ability to facilitate healthy marriages, relationships and families in the child welfare population, with the end goal of promoting and improving the well-being of children.*

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## C.S. Lewis

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.

(<http://thinkexist.com/quotation/love-anything-and-your-heart-will-be-wrung-and/347988.html>)

## Attachment Theory

- Attachment is an emotional bond with a specific person that is enduring across time and space.
- Attachment theory is a framework for discussion of interpersonal relationships between people, especially families.

## Who

- Attachment theory originated in the work of **John Bowlby**.
- Bowlby's seminal work on attachment and loss and the subsequent work of his student, **Mary Dinsmore Salter Ainsworth**, form the core of attachment theory.

## Beginnings

- In infancy attachment is accomplished through contact comfort with the primary caregiver. Healthy attachment brings love, security, and joy; unhealthy attachment brings anxiety, grief, and depression.
- All humans form attachments to their primary caregivers in order to survive. (Bowlby, 1982 & 1988). An extensive body of research describes the evidence for attachment.
- Caregiver responses lead to the developmental patterns of attachment giving the individual a “working model” that will guide his/her feelings, thoughts, and expectations in later relationships.

## Ainsworth's 4 Attachment Categories

- **Secure**
  - Caregiver is a secure base and infant will show some distress when they leave and joy at the reunion.
- **Insecure/Resistant or Ambivalent**
  - Child is clingy in strange situations, upset when caregiver leaves and at reunion child will re-establish contact but resists comfort.
- **Insecure/Avoidant**
  - Child avoids strange situations, does not greet caregiver upon return and child ignores strangers.
- **Disorganized/Disoriented**
  - Child shows no consistent way of coping, has dazed expression and demonstrates variable behavior at loss of or reunion with caregiver.

(Sroufe, 2003)

## Attachment and Family

- Attachment Theory offers unique data about the dyadic relationship that can be helpful
  - Observable
  - Effective for intergenerational issues and family of origin issues.
  - Useful to explore the ongoing impact of past relationships and gives useful information about issues of unresolved loss or trauma.
- Wide support in the research to pay close attention to the attachment styles and relationships (dyadic) within the family as well as working with the family systems.

(Akister and Reibstein, 2004)

## Adult Couple Relationships

- Romantic love is an attachment process. The partner becomes an attachment figure. (Hazan and Shaver, 1987)
- Person's adult style of romantic attachment is also affected by attachment history.
  - Emotional bond that develops between adults is impacted by the "working model" of attachment formed as a child
- Partner's characteristics can either maintain existing working models or promote change for better or worse.

(Akister and Reibstein, 2004)

## Four key points

- The couple relationship can either foster or erode the sense of security of its members.
- Pursuer-distancer cycles (family systems) are especially relevant to an understanding of couples' attachment relationships.
- Transition points provide a particular challenge for the couple systems, as partners seek to re-establish familiar interaction patterns or to develop new patterns.
- There is mutual influence between the couple unit and other subsystems of the family.

(Feeney, 2003 via Akister and Reibstein, 2004)

# Attachment and Family Systems Theory

(Akister and Reibstein, 2004)

- Attachment theory has a particular strength in addressing the emotions and motivations associated with intimate relating, whereas systems theory highlights the need to consider the broader context in which individuals and relationships are embedded.
- Partners influence each other in complex, bi-directional ways
  - Ex: sense of attachment security in one partner can facilitate the autonomy needs in the other.
- With arrival of a child, the system has to alter to accommodate the new member and couples' attachment relationship will need to accommodate.

## Sense of Attachment Security in Couples is associated with

- Positive beliefs about couple relationships
- The formation of more stable couple relationships
- Satisfaction with dating relationships and marriage
- High levels of intimacy, commitment and emotional involvement within the relationship
- Positive patterns of communication

(Akister and Reibstein, 2004)

## Basic Needs Met in Families

- Safety
- Love
- Security
- Acceptance
- Reassurance
- Support

# Attachment and Families I

- Attachment is an innate motivating force
  - Contact, closeness, dependency GOOD
- Secure dependence compliments autonomy
  - Security builds autonomy
- Attachment offers a safe haven
  - Comfort and a buffer
- Attachment offers a secure base
  - Promotes confidence

(Johnson, 2004)

## Susan Johnson on Attachment II

- Accessibility and responsiveness build bonds
  - Engagement and emotional accessibility
- Fear and uncertainty activate attachment bonds
  - Threat, emotions, and attachment
- Process of separation distress is predictable
  - Protest, clinging, depression, despair, detachment
- Isolation and loss are inherently traumatizing
  - Deprived of reassuring connection and soothing

(Johnson, 2004)

## Susan Johnson (2002)

It is the ability to derive comfort from another human being that ultimately determines the aftermath of trauma, not the history of the trauma itself.

## Families, Attachment, and Crisis/Trauma

- A Shattering or Continued Suppression  
around issues of
  - Safety
  - Control
  - Meaning
  - Security

## Susan Johnson (2002)

Isolation from others becomes as pernicious in its effects as traumatic abuse itself.

Ways of coping, such as dissociation, make revictimization more likely and tend to perpetuate insecurity and relationship difficulties.

## Implications for your work

- Assessment of Attachment styles and attachment injuries and functioning
- Mate selection
  - Ability to identify responsive caregiving qualities as attractive.
  - Secure adults tend to be more satisfied in their relationships.
    - Relationships are characterized by trust, commitment and interdependence.
    - Tend to seek support from mate.
- Parenting – ability to form healthy attachments with children.
- Labels and boxes
- Need for healing

## Legacy of Child Maltreatment: A Child Welfare Perspective

- Experiences in childhood impact couple relationships.
  - Relationship between childhood traumas, sexual abuse in particular, and negative marital outcomes is well documented by research.
  - Marital disruption is more likely among those who experienced physical abuse, rape or serious physical attack during childhood.
  - Childhood rape and molestation is also associated with lower marital satisfaction which increase the risk of dissolution of relationships.

(Conway and Hutson, 2008)

## **Most Direct Effect of Maltreatment is on Intimacy & Personal Relationships Skills**

- Negatively influences an individual's patterns of interpersonal interaction interfering in the ability to form and maintain healthy adult relationships.
- Partners who have been abused have higher individual stress symptoms and often their partner will have secondary trauma resulting from:
  - Hearing about the event.
  - Identifying with the trauma survivor
  - Trauma survivor interacting with partner in ways that are traumatizing.

(Conway and Hutson, 2008)

## **Child Abuse and Neglect Put the Child at Risk of Negative Outcomes**

- These negative outcomes can also serve as barrier to a healthy relationship. The negative outcomes can include:
  - Low educational attainment.
  - Employment risks and low financial resources.
  - Mental and physical health problems.
  - Substance abuse.
  - Incarceration.
  - Early child bearing and multi-partner fertility.
  - Involvement in the child welfare system and justice system.

***Ramification of Child Abuse Exist Well into Adulthood***

(Conway and Hutson, 2008)

## Role Play

- FLE and a therapist visit a family
- Single mom, live in boyfriend, 4 kids
- Report of abuse
- You have been asked to work with mom and boyfriend on parenting

## Elaine S. Marshall (2002)

On that first day as a nurse, I assumed cure, care, and healing to be synonymous. I have learned they are not the same.

### **Healing is not cure.**

Cure is clean, quick, and done--often under anesthesia. The antibiotic kills the pathogen; the scalpel cuts out the malignancy; the medication resolves the distorted chemistry.

Healing, however, is often a lifelong process of recovery and growth in spite of, maybe because of, enduring physical, emotional, or spiritual assault. It requires time. We may pray for cure when we really need healing.

## Continued

Whether for cell reconstruction, for nerve and muscle rehabilitation, for emotional recovery, or for spiritual forgiveness, healing needs work and time and energy. Healing cannot happen in a surgical suite where the pain is only a sleepy memory. Cure is passive, as you submit your body to the practitioner.

Healing is active. It requires all the energy of your entire being. You have to *be* there, fully awake, aware, and participating when it happens.

## Required Reading

- Conway, T. and Rutledge, Q.H. (2008). Healthy marriage and the legacy of child maltreatment: A child welfare perspective. Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) Brief 12: May 2008.
- Johnson, S. M. (1996), Attachment and trauma. *Emotionally focused couple therapy with trauma survivors*. 3: 36-61.

## Suggested Reading

- Rothbaum, F., Rosen, K., Ujiie, T. and Uchida, N. (2002). Family systems theory, attachment theory, and culture. *Family Process*. 41:3 p. 328 – 350.

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