

The Basics: Internalizing the Principles

The *Feeling* of Attachment

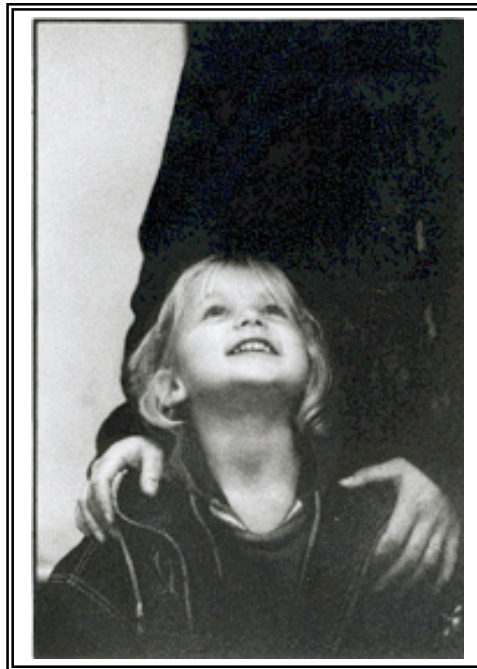
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We are beginning this series of articles on integrating the basics in response to requests from GAINS members for some words devoted to fleshing out a felt awareness of some of the core aspects of interpersonal neurobiology. The goal is to bring right and left hemisphere knowing together, so we have living principles within us. We are convinced that the more we are able to embody these knowings, the more we can be present with clients, students, business associates, friends, family—and ourselves.

For many years, I had a sense of the importance of attachment. I also had a rough idea that it came in two flavors—secure and insecure, which translated in my mind as healthy and damaged. Even further back, in graduate school, I could no doubt rehearse the names for the insecure categories. However, having swallowed the information in a primarily left-brain environment, the categories had no visceral meaning for me, and consequently, stuck in an approximate way. Then, I was offered the opportunity to do Immersion Training with Dan Siegel. This is an experience wherein people get to know his book, *The Developing Mind*, intimately, under conditions of high arousal, since they will be “teaching” one another and Dan concepts from the book. The real hook was that we didn’t know what our portion of the book would be until right before the training. My survival instinct urged me to get a firmer grip on the nuances of all kinds of attachment possibilities, among other principles.

In the process, integrative doors began to open in my mind. I started to link what I was reading with my years of experience in the counseling room. Understanding the neurobiological consequences of various kinds of attachment bonds seemed to tie visceral experiences and intellectual concepts together. Then, the process of the Immersion group, which

turned out to be a strongly integrative experience because of Dan’s intention to foster support and acceptance at every stage, further encouraged both vertical (body/limbic/cortex on the right) and bilateral (left-right hemisphere) integration of many of the concepts. As a result, I saw my clients with greater clarity and compassion, which immediately helped them hold themselves with more tenderness.



I gradually became aware that being in the presence of each kind of attachment carries an experience that touches body, emotions and thoughts. This process arises within the resonance circuits that allow representations of each other’s inner worlds to become embedded within us. These circuits accumulate in a way similar to striking a guitar chord, building from one string to the full harmony, with increasing richness. The initial string is plucked when our mirror neurons are stimulated by us witnessing the familiar, intentional action of another (Carr, Iacoboni, et al, 2003). This resonance then reverberates

through circuits that enable imitation and awareness of intention. The accumulating vibration is collected by the insula, which carries it to the limbic regions and body, adding emotional states to the representation. Perceptual bias is also stimulated here, perhaps warping our awareness to bring it into line with previous experience.

However, as the insula again gathers the information and involves the middle prefrontal regions, completing the chord, we may become mindfully aware of the richness of another's inner state (Carr, Iacoboni, et al, 2003; Siegel, in press). This capacity resides to some degree in every human being with intact resonance circuits.

It is no wonder, then, that we can take in and represent the attachment pattern of someone with whom we are relating. As they are with us, their always implicit and sometimes explicit intention to attach in a particular way will be activated. We may subjectively experience this process as a wave of awareness and empathy reverberating through body, brain, and thoughts.

To understand attachment, we can look from two viewpoints, that of the child whose *style of attachment* most often parallels that of the parents (Ainsworth, Blehar, et al, 1978; Siegel & Hartzell, 2003), and that of the adult, who has a *state of mind with regard to attachment* (Main & Solomon, 1986) that is a product of historical experience, modified by the degree to which the person has *made sense* of that history (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003). As Siegel and Hartzell say, "How we have come to make sense of our lives, how we tell a coherent story of our early life experiences, is the best predictor of how our children will become attached to us. Adults who have made sense of their lives have an adult security of attachment and are likely to have children who are securely attached to them" (p. 123). The same is true for the transmission of insecure attachment.

What is it like to be with adults who have a *free, autonomous, secure state of mind with regard to attachment?* (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999) We may notice a sense of ease in our bodies as we talk with this person, and find that the characters in their stories feel alive in the room. They are able to share both painful and joyous memories in a coherent way. There will likely be a sense of welcome and connection that invites us into mutual conversation. We feel included, and may sense that these people are able to read and respond to

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the nuances of feeling in face, posture, tone of voice, and all the other ways we communicate without words. This sensitivity may give us a feeling of security and trustworthiness. When times are tough, after brief periods of being off balance, we get the sense that these people can quickly right themselves because they have such excellent sources of self-regulation, hope, and resilience. Overall, such relationships promote increasing neural integration in both parties, because of the frequent presence of empathy and attuned communication.

Imagine being the child of such a parent. You would quickly learn that your requests for connection are well received for the most part, and when they aren't, your parents would sense the disconnection and quickly move to repair it. If we picture a baby's eyes gazing into the responsive face of such a parent, we may be able to feel the sense of security and trust seeding itself in that infant mind. If we have a secure state of mind with regard to attachment, resonating with such connection may

reawaken and bring to consciousness those earliest experiences with a flood of warmth. However, if we have not been so fortunate, such experiences may bring forward the pain of our need for such affirming connection, together with the opportunity to provide tenderness now for our young self. If we are able to mindfully experience such pain, with our caring observer providing empathy for what we endured, this encounter with grief can lead to healing neural integration of this experience.

Now let's see if we can sense the flavor of insecure attachments. To begin, how might we experience an adult with a *dismissing state of mind with regard to attachment?* (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999) This person may seem quite affable and willing to engage. However, as the conversation proceeds, we might feel heavy in our bodies as we notice boredom or emptiness emerging in our minds. We will likely sense that we can't relate to the characters in the anecdotes being told because they feel wooden or faded, or sometimes completely

absent. These stories also tend to feel more “told at us” than “shared with us.” We may become sleepy or anxious as the lack of connection echoes through our being. All of this signals that our resonance circuits have drawn us into our acquaintance’s emotional desert. We might possibly perk up if we become mindful of this disconnect, allowing sadness about that state of mind to become a source of empathy for the other person, rather than merely fueling a desire to flee.

Part of having such empathy can come from understanding what probably got wired into this person’s mind as a child. It is highly probable that she³ also grew up with one or more dismissing parents who implicitly taught her to disconnect right and left hemispheres, severely curtailing the flow of emotional and visceral information from the right. This leaves the child (and adult) without a clue about how she is feeling, without the felt basis for a coherent story of her life, and with serious deficits in the ability to read others’ faces and bodies. Why would parents impart such a lesson? We can imagine that, as children, their signals also went unheeded, causing such pain that the best solution seemed to become unaware of the intense longing for connection that is hard-wired into our brains. In such lessons, which are intended to create safety for the child, are the roots of *avoidant attachment* (Ainsworth, Blehar, et al, 1978). However, if we could sense it, we might find that our acquaintance’s heart rate accelerates significantly when we offer connection, because the limbic longing remains alive in the right hemisphere, even though she has no conscious awareness of it.

As we resonate with this person, our own history will also be touched. For example, if we have experienced dismissal as children, the disconnection may all seem quite normal, and we might merely drift away toward another disconnected conversation. However, if we find the inner resources to be more mindful of our state,

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we could begin to build bridges across the corpus callosum, allowing the painful need for connection to emerge. Such increased awareness might even spark new neural activity in our acquaintance through the glory of resonance circuits. In this way, every encounter with another is potentially an opportunity to unfold awareness and healing for one another and ourselves.

If a *dismissing state of mind with regard to attachment* gives the feeling of an emotional desert, a *preoccupied state of mind* (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999) can be experienced as a teeming, unmodulated, right-brain dominant jungle—but only part of the time. For children, the result will usually be an *ambivalent attachment* (Ainsworth, Blehar, et al, 1978). The name springs from the way the child experiences the parent shifting back and forth between a more whole-brained capacity for empathy and contingent communication, and the loss of that ability when her parent’s mind is suddenly engulfed and preoccupied by the limbic energy and information erupting from unintegrated neural nets holding past painful or frightening experience. At that point, overwhelming perceptual bias, fueled by mental models from past wounds, cuts the parent off from contact with the present moment, making him unavailable for attunement with his child.

How might we experience such preoccupation? When we are talking with such a person, we may find the past frequently pushing up in the midst of his story, disrupting the flow and making it hard to follow. There can be the sensation of the characters in the narrative milling about, so that they feel vividly present, but hard to grasp. We might feel unexpectedly anxious, and have a desire to cut him off to help him organize the swirling tale, as our own left hemisphere urgently wishes to ameliorate the discomfort by making sense of the narrative. These urges may be particularly powerful if we have had our own experiences with a preoccupied parent.

The integration of left and right is indeed one of the neural processes that will ease this person’s suffering. However, if the suggestion is fueled by

³ I prefer using “he” and “she” in alternating examples, rather than the more awkward “s/he.” No gender bias is intended.

our anxiety, it is unlikely to work because of the contradictory messages being received by his resonance circuits. If, instead, we can remain mindful, the calm may be contagious, allowing him to use our empathy to integrate the painful feelings, gradually reducing their intrusiveness.

Preoccupation and the resulting ambivalence have the flavor of disorganization at times, but when this comes into full flower, we have entered the world of a person with an *unresolved/disorganized state of mind with regard to attachment* (Hesse & Main, 2000; Main & Solomon, 1986). Let me share a story from my counseling experience to set the experiential tone. I was seeing a couple, both of whose mothers had unhealed histories of severe abuse. His mother had withdrawn into a cocoon of depression to avoid the inner terror, while her mother jabbed at her with intense criticism and demands for attention, attempts at connection whose intrusiveness may have mimicked her own abuse. Both partners had developed considerable compassion for these broken women, an ability that also allowed them to help one another when patches of disorganized feelings would erupt.

Then, one day when we were together, the husband laughed incongruently at something his wife said. As her body tightened and turned away from him, I got a mental image of her wanting to fold into invisibility. She tried to speak, but only fragments came out. "I...how could...why?" He immediately perceived her pain, and his chest collapsed. He twisted his body to try to make eye contact with her. She contorted her body to avoid him. He put his head in his hands, trying to speak, "We...when...horrible."

At that exact moment, my mind shut down. I was unable to form any thoughts, and profoundly aware of a crushing sensation in my head and chest, with rivers of adrenalized terror flowing under my skin, followed by images of shattering glass—all this the gift of resonance circuits. With gratitude for enough mindfulness to allow my caring observer to stay engaged, I became aware that part of my mind was able to hold what all three of us were

experiencing. Without my willing it, I found my body moving slightly closer to them, with my arms in a position that might have been visually experienced as an embrace, as though to hold their suffering (and probably my own as well). We were silent for a long time, until the disorganization receded, probably into somewhat greater integration, or maybe merely because their nervous systems were exhausted, allowing adult functioning to reemerge.

Imagine the experience a child would have in the presence of a parent who is swept helplessly into this terror. Given the undeveloped state of that infant mind, we can envision pockets of fragmenting horror without possibility of comfort being wired in, since the source of the terror is the very person from whom help is expected. Sadly, even if the parent doesn't act on these states, the baby's resonance circuits draw in this energy and information, creating mental models of the dreadful unpredictability of the relational world.

Depending on many factors—temperament, genetics, offsetting solid relationships, the disorganized parent's willingness to heal—such a person may have pools or oceans of disorganization. Like land minds, these lie in wait for a resonating internal or external event to trip the wire. When we are able to remain mindfully centered in the presence of such an event, we have the opportunity to create a safe haven for the child or adult whose mind is flying apart. Bit by bit, integration of these dissociated circuits into the flowing river of the more coherent parts of the mind will bring moments relief until a more secure model of attachment gradually emerges to provide a solid foundation.

With our maturing ability to have a mindful experience of such patterns of attachment, we may become aware that we are entering an intergenerational world. Often, we will have the experience of what it might be like to be this person's child, to feel the rejection of dismissal, the hypervigilance of an unpredictable response, or the mind-numbing terror of disorganization. At the

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same time, we may be feeling what it was like for this adult when she was a child. Vistas of empathy expand, and, if we are able to understand what is happening neurobiologically as well, we have the opportunity to offer connection in a way that can foster neural integration.

In the interest of getting a clear grasp of how variations in attachment might feel, I have presented these styles as though they stand alone. However, we can all have more than one state of mind with regard to attachment, based on the various intimate relationships present in our early lives. These states of mind are also constantly in flux, as our adult connections continue to stimulate our brains to rewire themselves. It is estimated that an insecurely attached person can achieve an earned secure attachment in about five years if their intimate partner is securely attached. Also, mental models of attachment vary in their intensity

along a continuum as well.

Even with all this variation, I have found that by attending to my body, I can sometimes feel shifts in those close to me as they move through the encounters of their day. I was talking with a friend whose presence usually relaxes me into easy connection, stimulating whatever parts of secure attachment we both possess. After a few minutes, the man next door walked up, rudely intruding himself to complain about the way her tree was depositing ripe avocados in his yard. I saw her eyes dart away from his, and felt my body grow tense with anxiety. My mind held the image of her father, who was alternately playful and critical, throwing her off balance. I breathed a bit more consciously to calm myself until the man went away. Then we breathed together to find our security again.

In addition to an MA in Marriage and Family Therapy, Bonnie Badenoch's doctorate in comparative religions from the University of Oriental Studies provides her with a broad view of issues of meaning and healing. As Executive Director/Senior Clinical Director at Center for Hope and Healing in Irvine, California, she works with a staff of marriage and family therapists, interns and child counselors, who find deep joy in supporting the recovery of individuals and families who have been devastated by abuse, neglect, and other kinds of intergenerational chaos. Bonnie has been a member of Dan Siegel's study group since January of 2005, and began studying and integrating IPNB with CHH's attachment-based theoretical model in 2003. It is her privilege to also share the insights of IPNB with fellow clinicians and the community. You can visit CHH's website www.centerforhopeandhealing.org or you can contact Bonnie at BonnieB@centerforhopeandhealing.org.

*Biological motherhood needs at least three links
with social experience: the mother's past
experience of being mothered; a conception of
motherhood shared with trustworthy
contemporary surroundings; and an
all-enveloping world-image tying past, present,
and future into a
convincing pattern of providence.
Only thus can mothers provide.
Erik H. Erikson
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