Creating an Internal Secure Base

With LaShelle Lowe-Charde

Emotional security is the gateway to fulfilling relationships and a sense of ease and joy in daily life. Emotional security, in the realm of psychological attachment, is a relational confidence in which you know and trust and that your feelings and needs are as important as the feelings and needs of others. Thus, in the face of a sense of threat, emotional security allows you to express your needs directly and turn to someone who can truly provide a sense of caring and comfort (warmth, empathy, attunement, responsiveness, & affect regulation).

Attachment research tells us that as a child you and your primary caregiver shaped your experience of emotional attachment. From that shaping you developed an internal model or set of expectations about how caring and comfort could be accessed in relationship. If that internal model was not one of security, you are carrying with you an internal model that can continue to shape your relationships in such a way that the original attachment dynamic is reenacted in your adult relationships.

If this is the case, then you likely already know that your relationships tend not to go as you would like. You either feel anxious and want more reassurance than the other person can give, or you feel defensive and disconnected thinking others are invasive and trying to control you.

The two most common forms of reactivity that attachment research names are: Anxious and Avoidant. Like any reactive pattern these show up more or less often depending the level of security you can or can't access in the moment that the attachment system is activated. And, of course, not all interactions or situations activate the attachment system, thus these patterns remain dormant at times. In the big picture, with any type of attachment reactivity, there is a sense of insecurity, separateness, and the belief that love, and acceptance cannot be trusted or accessed reliably. This painful internal experience is defended against in a variety of ways and that's, in part, how we get types of reactive attachment patterns.

As with any "typing" system, the purpose is to identify your own habits of perceiving, thinking, believing, and behaving rather finding your "type." Below is a short list of reactive behaviors relative to type. Any of these behaviors may occur in very subtle ways or in very obvious ways. Examine your perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, and behavior closely, before assuming something doesn't apply to you.

Anxious

- Difficult relationship moments bring up thoughts of loss, separation, rejection, and painful emotions.
- Makes decisions oriented toward getting relief from aversive states (anxiety) rather than pursuing satisfaction of other needs

- Minimizes cognitive, emotional, and physical distance (e.g., a difference of opinion can be a threat)
- Expresses doubt about lovability, inclusion, or belonging.
- Expresses doubt or suspicion about security of the bond and may frequently accuse another of rejection, betrayal, or abandonment.
- Has difficulty calming down and feeling secure when responsiveness is offered
- Tries to keep the attachment system activated through seeking help, triggering conflict, making demands, or intensifying emotion.

Avoidant

- Attempts to control and maximize psychological distance by avoiding emotional interaction, self-disclosure, intimacy, or interdependence.
- Denies or suppresses attachment related feelings and needs. (May use substances to do this).
- Leaves intimate relationships before the other person can leave them.
- Inflates self-image. Believes they are the strong and competent one while others are weak and stupid. Or, is inflated by association with idealized others.
- Criticizes others to maintain emotional distance.
- Dismisses or minimizes other's feelings and needs.
- Compares current partner or friend to "better" aspects of previous partners or friends.
- Has difficulty calming down when responsiveness is offered, though distress may not be visible.

When perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors like these can't be reflected upon or challenged, change is very difficult to access. For either type of reactivity, this ability to reflect on experience is an essential skill that requires intensive support to cultivate if it is not present. The ability to reflect on experience is a key feature of a sense of security.

In addition to the ability to reflect on experience, three basic tasks are essential:

1. Learn to maintain awareness of your own body, feelings, and needs while remaining grounded/regulated.
2. Communicate feelings and needs from a grounded self-honoring place and collaborate around meeting needs with care for the other's feelings and needs and a sense of trust in their caring for you.
3. Receive and be nourished by others who respond to you with caring and comfort.

These three tasks require awareness of the reactive pattern and a simultaneous willingness to experience the discomfort and vulnerability of not perceiving, thinking, believing, and behaving in the habitual reactive way. If discomfort and vulnerability are not present, then it is likely that you are not engaging in a new way.

If these three tasks can be consistently engaged with adequate support, your internal model of relationship begins to change from one that expects pain to one that expects caring. Working with a reactive attachment pattern might most effectively begin with choosing a particular

relationship to practice with. A therapist who can establish a healing attachment relationship with you is, perhaps, the most obvious choice. In everyday relationships, a variety of strategies can be implemented to move toward a sense of greater security in relationship:

- In mindfulness, notice the impulse to move toward or away from another and the type of consciousness that's present with that impulse.
- In times of distress, bring to mind someone who loves and supports you.
- Regularly reflect upon and share feelings and needs with someone who can offer caring and responsiveness.
- Learn and practice self-soothing / affect regulation strategies.
- Frequently and consistently give your attention to all the ways others express care for you.

The good news about a sense of security in relationship is that healing and practice can occur, and the original reactive attachment pattern can shift to one of security. If you are a parent, and do your healing work, you can raise secure children. If you are in a romantic partnership, and do your healing work, you can benefit from the responsiveness of a secure partner. If you have close friends and community, and do your healing work, you can take in and trust the caring and comfort that is freely given.

Practice

Set a timer for two minutes. In those two minutes, bring to mind experiences of care and comfort with others.