

Attachment-Trauma Overview

A healthy attachment style is one where the child feels safe and reassured in the presence of their attachment figure. With repeated trauma in the caregiver system however, the attachment figure is seen as unable to keep the child safe and becomes the source of distress. An unhealthy attachment system can be thought of as a cycle where the caregiver does not meet the child's needs and the child enters the fight-flight-freeze mode. The child then develops an internal working model that relationships are unsafe and the child feels out of control. When an attachment system is compromised like this, the child must develop adaptations to keep themselves safe. While these adaptations work in the moment, they have negative repercussions for the future (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2007).

The attachment relationship facilitates the development of the Orbitofrontal Cortex (OFC), the brain's control center for emotions and memory. Attachment interrupters, such as trauma and neglect, hinder the OFC growth (Siegel, 2010). Both traumatic experiences and attachment betrayals impair memory integration. Meaning, only the implicit (sensations) part of the memory is encoded. Implicit memories allow the brain to generalize from experiences and construct a mental model after repeated events. Implicit memories create priming where the brain readies itself to respond in a specific way to certain triggers. As a result, parts of the memory intrude into the present day through numbing, avoidance and re-experiencing the event. Without the explicit part of the memory encoded, the individual is unable to know that the feelings are associated with something from the past and not the current experience (Siegel, 2010). Furthermore, an insecure attachment affects the prefrontal cortex as seen with

lack of empathy, inappropriate social behavior, poor impulse control, difficulty reading nonverbal cues, risk of depression, addictive behaviors and lack of judgment.

Attachment-based interventions help diminish early developmental disruptions by focusing on the caregiver-child relationship. Attachment-based interventions concentrate on building the safe relational system the child craves. These interventions teach parents to regulate their own emotional responses, allowing them the space to effectively respond to their child's distressing behavior. Parents are also taught the importance of attunement- understanding the underlying emotional needs of their child's behavior. Through these interventions, parents learn the need of predictability and consistency in establishing safety for their child (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2007). Lastly, the attachment relationship is developed to act as a buffer from the psychological harm of the trauma and provides resilience in the face of adversity.

Blaustein, M.,E. & Kinniburgh, K.,M. (2007). Intervening beyond the child: the intertwining nature of attachment and trauma. *British Psychological Society Briefing Paper*, 26, 48–53.

Siegel, D.J. (2010). *Mindsight: The new science of personal transformation*. New York: Random House Publishing.