

Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

Growing into Connected Relationship

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**David T. Tharp,
M.D., M.Div.,**

**Board Certified
Psychiatrist**

Medical Director

**Stonebriar Psychiatric
Services, PA**
3550 Parkwood Blvd.
Suite 705
Frisco, TX 75034

Phone
972-335-2430

E-mail
NewsletterQuestions@
stonebriarps.com

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Growing into Connected Relationship

By Wendy Copeland, M.A., LPC

Full Potential

From the moment of conception, we come into being with the potential to grow into wholeness and full aliveness. We also come with genetic coding providing a blueprint for development; this can be activated through proper environmental support. If we are healthy gestationally and pregnancy was smooth, we are born with that wholeness relatively intact. This wholeness is the hardwiring to sense, think, feel, and act with full aliveness. This also includes the full potential for relationship – to connect and be connected. Neurologically, we arrive hardwired for relationship.

Given all this, we also arrive with our energy pulsating in a balanced way, with full capacity to be empathically attuned to others and fully aware of ourselves. Empathic attunement is present from the first moments of life. Replicated studies on infants have found that they cry in response to hearing another baby's cries, empathically attuning to pain.

Survival Impulses and Brain Development

At each stage of childhood and adolescence, developmental impulses related to survival will emerge. These impulses give rise to specific needs – the need to attach, to explore, to develop a sense of self and a sense of competence in the world, to care for others, and to be emotionally and sexually intimate. These impulses will emerge independent of external circumstances, coming “on line” because they are part of our core survival programming.

As we grow and our impulses surface, our interpersonal environment (eg., family, culture, society, religion, and institutions) will impact how our brain interprets safety and relationships. According to neuropsychiatrist Daniel Siegal, specific types of interpersonal experiences, at critical developmental periods, are essential in activating certain genes and the development of neuronal interconnections in the brain. In short, healthy development of the brain is dependent on environmental support. The essential mode of support is nurturance through primary caregivers.

Imperfect Parents, Imperfect Nurturance

Most parents do the best they can given their background and abilities. However, no one is a perfect parent, nor did we come from perfect parents. Parental limitations may prevent their child's developmental needs from being met in an optimal way. As children, when needs are not met adequately, we experience emotional pain and inner tension. To cope, survive, or diminish the pain, we develop defensive adaptations. In order to survive, we learn to adapt. When applied repeatedly over time to defend against pain, these adaptations or defenses become integrated into our way of being in the world and we identify ourselves with them.

Adaptive Defenses and Relationship

As children of human, imperfect parents, we can assume that to some degree we were not perfectly nurtured. Further external demands from society, culture, and institutions also influenced our way of being and relating in the world. Messages about how we are to be in the world with regard to our self-expression were exchanged. We learned about gender expectations, societal norms, and how we would need to expand or constrict ourselves in order to function.

In childhood, we defend ourselves against the experience of pain by either maximizing our energy or minimizing our energy. This expansion or constriction of energy is in direct relationship to how our primary caregivers interacted with us. If a child has a parent who is over-involved, the contact itself feels painful, so the child tends to minimize her energy. A child who minimizes her energy will defend by shutting down, withdrawing, detaching, or avoiding attention. On the other hand, if a child has a parent who is under-involved, the loss or absence of parental contact is painful. In response to emotional pain, a child who maximizes his energy will defend by crying, whining, clinging, and drawing attention to himself.

These defensive adaptations to perceived emotional pain create strong neural pathways in the brain. Although we eventually leave childhood and mature into adults, our neural pathways remain intact...and so do our defense adaptations. These defense mechanisms served us well as children, helping to defend from pain and restoring a sense of safety. As adults, they may continue to assist in functioning. In fact, we may advance in a particular career or profession due to the portability of our defense adaptations. For example, a child who learned to be highly independent and self-reliant because of an under-involved parent may choose a profession that requires strong leadership, self-motivation, and charisma. A child who has an over-involved parent may learn to withdraw, become introspective, and funnel energy into artistic expression. However, in our most intimate relationships, the very defense that protects us from perceived pain also prevents emotional connection. As one therapist once wisely said, "You can't relate to a defense."

So what do we do with the defense adaptations? They have served us well, helping us to survive and reach adulthood. They even service our work lives and add to our ability to navigate in a challenging, sometimes unpredictable world. Yet they also undermine us at the core of relational intimacy, creating strife, alienation, and loss. What worked in childhood can be deleterious to romantic relationship and couplehood.

The Good News

From a relational perspective, an individual wounded in relationship also needs to experience healing around that wound through relationship. By becoming aware of our own defense adaptations, we can become more intentional in our relationships. Through talking with significant others (and specifically your partner if you are in an intimate relationship), you can gain understanding of yourself and how you operate in relationships. When safety is present, partners are freed to explore themselves, gain understanding, and reconnect. And where there is safety and commitment, passion and joy grows.

Although we learned how to defend in childhood, few of us learned how to safely connect and stay connected. We spend our whole childhood and oftentimes many of our adult years in academics, learning about the world. Yet few of us ever receive an education in how to have successful intimate relationships. The good news is that we can learn the skills and techniques to have strong, connected relationships. This requires commitment, a desire to grow, and intentionality. When childhood wounding runs deep or our defense adaptations are sabotaging our present relationships, therapy can be immensely helpful in gaining an understanding of our relationships, in resolving conflict, and in reconnecting to our loved ones. We were never meant to just survive in relationship, we were meant to thrive in relationship!



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