

## **ATTACHMENT AND ITS RIPPLES**

### **3d National Conference on Mental Health Aspects of Persons Affected by Family Separation**

**Melbourne Town Hall 10 October 2006**

#### **Introduction**

Thank you very much for inviting me to this very important conference on family separation and its consequences. Families are the foundations of individuals and of society, and so if they are ruptured, the tears can be felt from individual to community levels.

Before I talk about attachment and its ripples I just want to mention my own experience. Luckily, it could have been worse, for I was reunited with my parents after three months. But because even such a separation had such large effects, I can appreciate a little what larger separations can engender.

Imagine mother father and a four year old boy in a street, in Budapest Hungary in 1942. I mention the context because separations like these occur in troubled times. Two detectives in trench coats approach us, have a discussion with my parents, following which my parents say to me, "We are going to get some ice cream with these gentlemen. We will be back in ten minutes." I have a large memory gap, which has slowly filled with much effort, gathering outside and inside information. It took me decades to assimilate that experience and to be able to talk about it. So I know that my parents were put in a cattle wagon to go to Auschwitz and I was taken to a farm. Amazingly, my parents escaped and returned. But my mother was different ever after, so even reunion may not end separation from a mother we once knew.

I am not here to tell my story, but I will say that one of the effects of that experience and of other events around me between the ages of 4 and 7 was a need to understand what happened to us. I wanted that understanding to help other children in my situation and to prevent other children having the type of experience that I had undergone. This was one motivating factor that propelled me to psychiatry and traumatology and to me talking to you here today.

### **Road map for this talk**

So now I will talk about attachment. First I will define it, then present its fulfilling aspects and its insufficient biological, psychological and social aspects, and the ripples stemming from good attachment and lack of attachment. Lastly I will present some hopeful and reparative possibilities even in spite of most severe early attachment ruptures.

### **Definition of Attachment**

In everyday language the word attachment is used synonymously with bond. I am attached to my friend, I am attached to my tea pot.

So my definition of attachment is this: Attachment is an instinctive bond with biological, psychological and social aspects that develops between 2 and 36 months especially between 3 and 12 months. The bond combines with the maternal and caretaking instincts of others to produce a proximity such that the caretaker is the vehicle for the survival and nurture of the infant.

What I will not talk about is loss, grief and depression, with which separation consequences are often confused. Loss and grief occur when attachment ceases, when it is given up. The two may overlap, when we don't know whether we are temporarily separated from a caretaker or whether we have lost her or him permanently. So as I said, for the sake of clarity, I will concentrate today on attachment and separation, though loss and grief are also very important.

### **Roots of Attachment**

Attachment evolved about 180 million years ago along with parental care. It is present in all mammals and birds. The separation cry is present in all these species, and may be the oldest vocal communication. Attachment is especially important in humans because of their prolonged infantile vulnerability. Attachment can occur spontaneously in disasters when a victim develops a strong attachment bond to his or her rescuer.

Attachment has features of an intense instinct. It is a stronger drive than hunger. This makes sense, as it is the attachment person who provides food and protection. The process of attachment is through imprinting, like in ducklings that follow their mother.

## Biological Aspects

### Healthy attachment

In spite of its importance, surprisingly little is known about the physiology of strong attachment.

### Separation

We know of a number of physiological effects of separation, which we will see have very important ripples. **First**, opioid levels in the blood are decreased. In all species morphine, heroin and opiates diminish separation calls. **Second**, the sympathetic nervous system is active in separation distress, and is associated with high nor-adrenaline secretion. In the later passive phase, heart rate and temperature are decreased, adrenocortical secretions are elevated and the immune system is depressed. **Third**, because mothers are important instruments in setting points for many physiological functions, separations may adversely affect synchrony and attunements of those functions, and lead to later misattunements with other parts of the body and the environment. For instance, immune system malfunction may lead to later vulnerability to infections and cancer.

## Psychological Aspects

### Healthy attachment

is associated with intense human satisfactions. Being *physically* held against the chest of a familiar attachment, and being *psychologically* recognized and held in the other's gaze and mind provide a sense of *security*. Minute by minute ministrations, long term consistency, reliability, and predictability provide a deep sense of being *cared for*.

Caretakers *nurture* and satisfy hunger, provide warmth, and establish deep physiological attunements and rhythms such as sleep. Like the food they provide fills the stomach and promotes satiety and physical growth, the empathy that well attached caretakers provide fills psychological holes and promotes contentment and psychological growth.

**In summary**, *being looked after, cared for and nurtured* by a special, powerful, abundant and benevolent person specially devoted to oneself, provides blissful physical and emotional satisfaction.

### Separation

In contrast, separation is associated with most intense human distress. Such psychic pain can be at least as painful as physical pain and may be more so.

A burns victim described her mother's lack of sympathy and walking out of the ward without a kind word as more painful than the burns.

### [Defences

Because separation is associated with some of the worst pains that humans know, I will digress for a moment and talk about defences against these pains. As I will talk about these pains, some of you may invoke some of these defences yourselves in order to not feel your personal pains. That is OK.

The most basic defence is dissociation, wrongly called disassociation. However, dis-association portrays well how information is broken up and placed in parts of the brain that keep it out of consciousness. We call it putting bad things out of one's mind. The information may be dis-associated in the right half of the brain which is not aware of itself or the information it contains.

If it is emotion that is dissociated, we call that psychic numbing, or feeling numb. If the cognitive reality of the situation is pushed out of mind we call it denial. If the sense of it happening is pushed away we call it derealization, if we acknowledge that it is happening but not to us, we call it depersonalization. If only the physical aspect remains we call it somatization, and if only the action part of it remains, we call it acting out. If we push the whole knowledge of the absent attachment figure and the associated responses from consciousness, we call it repression. Any, or any combination of these defences and some others, mitigate the pains that I will now mention.]

### **Psychic pain in separation**

I will mention four pains associated with separation.

**First** is *yearning*. Yearning appears with realization of the caretaker's absence. Like pangs of grief but very different in quality, it comes in waves. It is a pain in the chest which as it were swells out with an unreciprocated desire for the attachment figure.

**Second** pain is that of *missing*. It is like part of one's chest was scooped out and could only be replenished by the other person.

**Third** pain in the chest is that of *emptiness*. It is felt in the centre of the chest which feels as if it could crumple inward. The craving to fill the

emptiness may be confused with hunger of food, but it is actually person hunger.

**Fourth** pain is *aloneness*. As against inner emptiness in this case the universe is empty. People describe it as “being on a raft in the middle of an ocean” or “in a space capsule alone in the universe”. It is often interpreted as abandonment, rejection, being cast out to die.

A hug from the re-found attachment figure can neutralise all these pains.

On top of separation pains (though muted by defences) are *all the needs and cravings* that result from lack of nurture. These include hunger, cold, and disrupted physiological rhythms such as sleep.

All in all, lack of care and nurture results in a sense of helplessness in a world full of threat. Being abandoned leads to feeling unrelated, unconnected, alienation and being a non-entity.

## **Social Aspects**

### **Healthy Attachment**

Healthy union with an attachment figure results in successful protection and nurture, and a platform for evolving life. This occurs most frequently in childhood but may also occur in adult crises, as mentioned earlier.

A patient looking back on his resuscitation after a heart attack said, “I just concentrated on that nurse’s hand. She was like an angel, I knew that she would carry me through. I still think I owe my life to her.”

Secure closeness and nurture are marked by *contentment*. This is not a passive Nirvana state where all desire is extinguished. Rather, it is an active assimilation of abundant investments to zestfully fulfill life.

### **Separation**

Separation cries are not answered, the space inside the arms reaching out is not filled. The whole person, replicating the outreached arms may search to match the imprinted image with the real person.

Substitute caretakers who try to stem the search or satisfy the gap may intensify the distress.

A child who is insecurely attached because of prior separations may suffer anxious attachment. If experienced as whinging and clingy, it may be

rejected, leading to intensification of its anxious attachment, and a vicious spiral is set up.

*Deprivation* due to lack of care and neglect leads to a variety of deficiency states such as malnutrition, exposure, and lack of thriving. Severe social and emotional deprivation especially in infants is like deprivation of a vital element of survival. Children may even die. This brings us to consider the symptoms and illnesses or disorders stemming from insufficient attachment.

### **Symptoms, Illnesses and Disorders**

Considering the core physiological, psychological and social disturbances insufficient attachment creates, it will not surprise us if it leads to an astounding multitude of maladaptive consequences.

#### **Physical Aspects**

Unrecognized aspects of separation psychic pain and deprivation may constitute a large part of the estimated quarter to half the physical symptoms in general practice. Suppressed separation screams may present as breathing difficulties, including asthma. Yearning and missing may be misdiagnosed as heart disease. Because person hunger may ride on the back of food hunger attachment difficulties may present with a variety of digestive difficulties: from 'three month colic' in infants to nausea, indigestion, hunger, obesity, and a variety of oesophageal, stomach and bowel symptoms in both children and adults.

Separation trauma has also been linked to urticaria, neurodermatitis, and eczema, and presumably through early compromise of the immune system to increased susceptibility to infections, allergies, autoimmune diseases, diabetes and cancers. I cannot but help thinking that these very illnesses contribute to higher mortality rates among our indigenous population, many of whom suffered early attachment traumas.

#### **Psychological Aspects**

Separation anxiety, fear of the dark, being alone, being with strangers, being outside the house (agoraphobia) are common consequences of insecure attachment. Yearning, emptiness, aloneness, feelings of abandonment and rejection may persist in different fragments and combinations and be misdiagnosed as depression or personality disorders such as dependent, histrionic, avoidant and borderline personality disorders.

Defences may lead to symptoms such as a sense of emotional deadness, not being oneself, and alienation; while flashes of escaped emotions and impulses may be misdiagnosed as antisocial, and impulse control disorders.

### **Social Aspects**

Responses to acute separations include crying, clinging, dependence and school refusal.

In later life adults may comfort their inner emptiness with food (possibly leading to obesity), cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, doctor visits, and excess sexuality and premature pregnancy. Inadequate earliest socialization may now develop into marital and transgenerational relationship difficulties, including separations, anger and clinging. Extreme manifestations include violence, accidents, overdoses and self mutilation.

Before being too critical of what in psychiatry are called addictive, dependent, antisocial, or borderline personalities, one should recall the extreme psychic pains (yearning, missing, emptiness and loneliness) that underlie drug taking (remember that heroin and related substances calm separation distress in all species), make women stay with violent men, and that make men violent in attempts to gain some respect and care.

## **Attachment and Separation Ripples**

### **Ripples across the life cycle and the generations**

Early attachment experiences establish physical, psychological and behavioural platforms for later stations in life. Individuation and separation achievements and problems re-emerge and repeat themselves at times of challenge such as school entry, adolescence, leaving home, and losing people.

Early experiences are re-evoked when one's children reach the stages of one's own attachment challenges. The learned model may be repeated down the generations.

### **Ripples in society**

Successes and failures in primary attachment bonds may be replicated wherever people depend on others- in families, school, employment, and social groups and communities. Images of parents may be reflected on teachers, police, and leaders. On the other hand, insufficient attachment may be made up for in these later situations and persons.

### **Ripples in the “soul”**

Attachment in its positive and negative guises ripples through the human mind from its most basic survival needs to its most spiritual levels.

Thus a well attached child will form judgements that it is good, wanted, valuable and lovable. It will have faith in always being cared for, in its right to have its needs met. Such a child is relatively likely to develop optimistic views of its place in the scheme of things and in the universe. Its life will seem to have meaning and purpose.

An unattached child may be angry with its caretakers, but perhaps more so, tends to feel guilt, interpreting that its rejection was for having done something bad. The child will also tend to feel unworthy and unlovable, and feel that it has no rights to demand that its needs be met. The child will be ashamed of its weakness and helplessness, and may compensate for them with aggression and humiliation of others. Still, such a child may grow up to feel that it has no secure niche in the world, no existential meaning or purpose.

### **Insufficient Attachment Is Not the End**

I apologise if I painted separation from parents and its many consequences in a somewhat detached, scientific manner. As I mentioned, I know and believe that for a child separation from its parents is one of the most real catastrophes that can occur. I want to acknowledge that, but also to add some comments of hope. I believe them to be equally realistic.

**First** of all, I have painted extreme pictures in order to make my points. In fact everyone alive here must have had some experience of healthy attachment. The most common picture is that of traumatized parents not being able to meet the attachment needs of their children, which leads to various degrees of separation. But even the most torn away, or neglected, abused and deprived children must have had sufficient care for them to survive, and they must have extracted some benevolence from the world somehow, be it from their parents, substitute parents, dolls, blankets, pets, strangers and fantasies. .

**Second**, insufficient attachment does not diminish innate capacities that can find a place- in sport, craft, creative talent, and even helping others who lack sufficient attachment. Such capacities provide respect and a group to which one can belong.



**Third**, people can find comfort in religion, which provides an alternate world of attachment, meaning and purpose, or in a belief that provides goodness in the world.

But to my mind, the fourth and fifth hopes are the most important.

**Fourth** hope lies in the fact that we are all hard-wired for attachment. That means that it is never too late to experience it, its beneficial effects, and its ripples. This may occur in a variety of situations. One that I am acquainted with is therapy. And once experienced, the experience of healthy attachment cannot be wiped out or forgotten. It serves as a platform to build on.

**Fifth** and last, when we go back to the purpose of attachment, it is after all only a vehicle meant to enable an infant to survive. Once we are adults and we have survived, we do not need attachment figures. Even if we were given the best mother in the world, we do not need her anymore to put food in our mouths or carry us in her arms. So if we do not supplement our attachment experiences as adults, to some extent we can bypass them. We can regulate ourselves now.

With hope there is a cost. We need to grieve not having had what we desperately needed. The consolation is that those needs were in the past.

### **Conclusion**

Because humans need caretakers for a prolonged period of their childhoods, attachment is an important instinct that provides half the vehicle for such care. When parents provide the other half, the vehicle motors along nicely and the scenery along the journey is beautiful. When the vehicle is incomplete, the motor may falter, the vehicle may go off the road, and the world is topsy-turvy and dangerous.

I described some aspects of the beautiful and the topsy-turvy scenery. I concluded that even if the world is topsy-turvy at some time and the journey seems to have stopped, it is possible to come out of the damaged vehicle, and to continue the journey.