

# Psychotherapy Newsletter

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## Link Luster

A Scottish psychoanalyst, W.R.D. Fairbairn, accurately named and described the notion that we are primarily creatures that seek attachment. From the moment we are born, we desire and require warmth, security, nurturing, and connection with the other. We have heard the phrase 'failure to thrive' in reference to infants that are deprived of maternal closeness. Rene Spitz described an 'anaclitic depression' that develops in babies when they are separated from or neglected by their parent. Attachment is critical to the development and wellbeing of the human infant.

Apart from extreme cases of maternal and infant attachment disrupt, there are various degrees of attachment impairment that also play a significant role in our development and our ability to connect with other human beings. Because our development occurs minute by minute, day by day, month by month, year by year, growing up in our particular family milieu, we unconsciously learn to adapt to the style and limitations of the reality we function within. This is a generational, systemic phenomenon (unless some form of intervention occurs).

I notice when I work with clients from large families where they might have been one of five

(or even twelve) siblings growing up, they learned to adjust internally to the amount of attachment they could expect from their parent. Again, this is not something we 'consciously' think about, it is something we 'unconsciously' adjust to. We learn to what degree we must meet our own needs, not burden our mothers, and not expect our needs will be met by another. It is not necessarily only from large families that this 'adjustment' occurs. It transpires within all mother/infant dyads. The baby 'learns' what he or she can expect to receive. Sometimes a mother is depressed and not emotionally present for an infant. Sometimes a mother is anxious and has a limited capacity to tune in. Sometimes a mother is very capable and efficient in meeting certain needs of the infant, such as daily routines of eating and sleeping and diapering. Unfortunately, and at great detriment to the infant, the ability to be mindful of her child and emotionally connected may be severely limited. A certain important type of mirroring may not take place. A certain type of relaxed play and engagement may not occur. A certain type of presence and ability to 'know' her child in his or her own individuality may not happen. In some family systems, there are

chores to be done and tasks to be accomplished and life becomes organized around these goals.

Though internal adjustments are made, the need and longing for attachment does not go away. It becomes defensively managed. We can eventually stop thinking about it. Wilfred Bion referred to this notion as an 'attack on linking.' I stop thinking about what I need or want and I learn to get on with the task of living. I may become a very responsible and successful person, but I may have taught myself fairly thoroughly to not think about or expect to connect with others, except in a superficial way. Normally in adolescence and young adulthood our sexuality will compel us to seek the other and to become connected on a certain level, but it does not mean our capacity to actually tune in and engage emotionally is intact.

The lack of ability to emotionally connect is clearly observable in certain couples. Partners may have sustained a relationship for many years, but there is a sense of a low-grade depression in one or both members and a complaint of a disconnect. They may be 'logistically' in sync. They make sure things around the house are taken care of and kids are where they need to be, but the element of emotional attunement between them is missing. Sometimes one member of the couple becomes conscious of a disconnect before the other. Sometimes it never gets 'noticed' because a connection was not present growing up and there is no sense anything is 'missing' per se, just lacking (and even the 'lack' can feel usual and familiar).

The 'attack on linking' phenomenon is evident in individual work as well. It may manifest as a lack of discernment about a healthy choice of partner. Again, this occurs when a person is exposed to unhealthy dynamics in their childhood. They have disconnected their ability to notice the effects of the other on themselves. Sometimes it is more important to 'have someone' than to pay attention to the quality of the relating.

In some cases, extra marital affairs occur because it is too threatening to put all my 'attachment eggs in one basket.' I will give part of myself to my marital partner and part of myself to someone outside of my marriage. This helps dilute my expectations and the vulnerable risk of hoping one person will meet my needs. Or I will let my professional life become the 'other person,' hoping that feeling good about what I do will lessen my need for affirmation and validation from my partner. Prescription medications, street drugs, and alcohol can be an aid in the not thinking,

not feeling, not linking process (as well as shopping, eating, and collecting animals to name a very few).

My role as a psychotherapist often entails an effort to reconnect the 'linking.' Within the very unique and sacred relationship I have the honor of developing with my client, we can create a prototype of attachment and enhance their ability to bring themselves to another and begin to feel again. I can help my client 'think' after years of training themselves not to think because it was just too painful to let emotions register. This was an adaptive measure growing up, but is no longer useful in adulthood. Often this process feels like something they are learning to do from scratch, and in many ways they are. Tender and vulnerable connections are finally being forged for the first time. The fact that I must learn how to bring my inner workings to you, my partner, in order for us to enjoy intimacy is a new, but critical concept that begins to be integrated into the relationship. Finally the attachment and connection we have sought from the beginning of life has a chance to develop in our current most important relationship(s). In the spiritual realm, we can feel a profound shift in our sense of how personally interested and tuned in the God we worship might truly be.



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