

An Integrative Approach to Attachment-Focused Therapy

I hope you have had a chance to watch the new video made by ATTACH, available on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbsZART1v1Q>. In it, several of our most experienced experts in the field of Attachment discuss how interruptions in early attachment means there have been “hurts” or interruptions in the normal trajectory of relationship development. Babies are born expecting that their basic needs for safety, primary comfort, nurture, and predictability (“I know I can count on Mom/Dad to be there for me”), will be met. We are hard-wired at birth to trust our birth parents and to believe that we are very important to them. In healthy development, this trust eventually extends to families, and then the world at large. This becomes a complex and complicated picture. The reasons that this is so important to understand is that it has great implications for what therapeutic interventions should be offered to children and families for healing.

Based on these first critically important relationships, children learn the template for what it means to care about other people; how it feels to have another important person care for me? How do I show people that I like/love them? And what if they hurt me? If I don’t learn to trust adults or other people, how do I form friendships, learn normal social skills, understand what empathy is, or experience real, positive feelings about anyone? And if I do not experience safety in my earliest world, how can I ever feel safe? If I don’t feel safe, then I have to always be “on guard,” waiting for the next hurt, for “the other shoe to drop.”

Furthermore, if I was “hurttable,” or “expendable,” or “unlovable” in my very FIRST PRIMARY relationship, and SINCE my first relationship experience sets the stage for future relationships, then what would make me think that as I grow up, I am now NOT “hurttable,” or “expendable,” or “unlovable”? Deep down inside, I know the truth about me ... I’m not very important! I’m pretty “awful”! I’m not worthy of being loved. If you only knew the “real” me, then you wouldn’t waste time trying to be my Mom, my friend, my therapist.

Added to these earliest misinterpretations, there is now compelling evidence that early emotional traumas, such as these mentioned above, also interrupt certain biological development, most notably self-regulation and sensory integration. Ongoing research is studying apparent connections between attachment interruptions and behavior problems and learning problems in school. Further study will give us more information. Meanwhile, we are beginning to document safe and efficacious treatments to address these “mix-ups” in a child’s development.

With this complexity of issues, is it possible for any one therapeutic treatment/modality to treat all of these different interruptions in development? How do we know which ones need therapeutic interventions, and where treatment should start? We would not take our child to a general practitioner for heart surgery. Neither would you want a therapist only addresses treatment of behaviors when the cause for irrational behaviors may be attachment disruption, unresolved trauma or poor self-esteem or impaired sensory integration, etc.

I hope that in future issues we will highlight the many comprehensive assessment and treatment models that are currently being used in a few select clinics around the world. For the sake of this article, let's assume that an extensive assessment has helped us understand what types of traumas may be affecting a child's otherwise normal emotional, psychological, social, and biological development.

Over the past 17 years I have been associated with clinics and clinicians who have used an increasingly comprehensive, integrative approach to healing. Using our current knowledge of brain research, works by prominent attachment researchers and therapists, we have developed interventions that are safe and that work. We are now offering the following types of treatments for each child and family that comes for therapy, carefully matched with the child and family's ever-changing needs. Integrated models, then, interweaving a range of ground-breaking therapeutic techniques, are being seen as the most powerful approach to healing. Taken as a whole, these therapies calm hyper-reactive activity in the brain, heal the brain by processing traumatic memories, and introduce new, pro-social templates for relationships and social behavior.

Listed here are several therapies that are showing great promise, especially when used together in an integrative model of matching the therapies with the type of problems that need attention at particular stages of development.

- Self-regulation, (learning to calm oneself) through EEG Biofeedback (Neurofeedback), yoga, and other biofeedback techniques,
- Teaching trust in relationships through Theraplay®, Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy, Narrative, and Attachment therapies,
- Trauma resolution, through Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), Neuro-Emotional Technique (NET), Trauma Art Narrative Therapy (TANT), Attachment-based Art, Music, Movement therapies,
- Grief and Loss Therapies
- Sensory Integration through work with Occupational Therapy, ideally on-site and integrated with psychotherapies.

Integrated therapies, offered after thorough, comprehensive evaluations, is proving the most efficacious and family-supportive way to help our children and families. Talk with your therapist, learn about various therapies, and let's all continue to support innovative, positive healing!

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