

Using Attachment Theory in Clinical Practice with Adults

By Pat Sable, MSW, Ph.D.

From a perspective of attachment theory, the quality of one's closest relationships beginning in infancy set the stage for subsequent development. When these relationships are secure, they promote self-reliance, confident exploration of the environment, and resiliency in dealing with life's stresses and crises. On the other hand, lack of secure attachment can lead to difficulties in regulating emotions and relating to others, engendering a vulnerability to psychological distress.

The framework of attachment is credited to John Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980), a British psychoanalyst, and also to Mary Ainsworth, a developmental psychologist whose laboratory procedure, the "Strange Situation," showed that Bowlby's evolving ideas could be tested and given a research base.

Attachment theory is a theory about those few key relationships that provide feelings of belonging, safety, and security at times of threat or danger. Psychological health is related to the positive quality of these attachment experiences, both present and past, and to the personal meaning that is attributed to them. Psychological distress is perceived as a distortion of the attachment behavioral system. Symptoms of anxiety, depression and/or anger reflect the internalization of adverse affectional experiences that have diverted developmental pathways away from adaptive functioning toward dysfunction (Sable, 2004). It is Bowlby's belief that feelings such as fear and anxiety are a natural response, part of our innate equipment to preserve vital bonds of attachment when they are in jeopardy. However, disturbing or disruptive attachment experiences can elicit defensive processes that intensify or exclude emotions at a level that interferes with their regulation. The mixed feelings and conflicting working models that result from these interpersonal defensive strategies are usually what bring people to therapy and become central to therapeutic work. This article will discuss three features that are unique to attachment-based treatment with adults: an ethological-evolutionary framework; a reformulation of Freud's concepts of anxiety; and the delineation of attachment styles, or patterns.

The Ethological-Evolutionary Framework of Attachment

Building on his psychoanalytic-object relations training, Bowlby added concepts from ethology (the study of animal behavior), evolutionary biology, systems theory and cognitive psychology to propose that we are born programmed to seek closeness and make an emotional bond, or attachment, to another. Attachment behavior is part of our instinctive equipment and is activated at any stage of the life cycle. It is, therefore, likely that clients are motivated for therapy at a time when their instinctive needs to feel the safety and protection of attachment figures are not being met (Harris, 1997).

A therapist who uses attachment theory conceptualizes treatment as offering the experience of an attachment relationship within which to remember, reflect on, and gain a new understanding of the events and experiences that have led to distress. The role of the therapist is to provide a secure base, both in the therapeutic bond and in the physical setting where therapy takes place. It is only when we can establish a meaningful connection with clients that they will feel safe enough to begin to explore the events and experiences that have been hampering their lives. Holmes (1999) describes the process of examining and sorting through experiences as story-making and story-breaking; like a puzzle, therapists help clients take the pieces of their history apart and rearrange them into a more coherent version.

The basic premise that attachment behavior is instinctive is central to this therapeutic technique. Responses such as fear and anxiety arise when there is a threat of danger or loss, and

should not be seen as regressive or immature. Explaining this can be reassuring and affirming while also giving a freedom to express concerns and fears that might otherwise be inhibited.

Separation, Anxiety, and Natural Clues

According to ethological attachment theory, fear of separation is an adaptive measure to keep personal bonds intact. Separation from an attachment figure, though not necessarily dangerous, is one of a group of naturally occurring clues of peril that humans, as well as other animals, are biologically designed to respond to because they signal potential risk. Other natural fears that elicit behaviors intended to keep a person in a familiar and safe environment, surrounded by trusted companions, include strangeness, isolation, changes in sound or light, or sudden movement.

Upon separation or threatened separation from an attachment figure, a child, as well as an adolescent or adult, manifests an agitation and anxiety that Bowlby called protest. This anxiety leads to an urgent attempt to search out and restore connection that is followed by a quieter, sadder phase of despair, during which hope of reconnection is fading. Finally, if the conditions of the disruption are prolonged, or repeated, attachment feelings may be defensively excluded, resulting in emotional detachment. If the rupture is not repaired or worked through, detachment can persist indefinitely. The concept of three phases of response to separation or threat of separation - protest, despair and detachment - along with that of natural clues, marks a modification of psychoanalytic theory. For example, I have proposed the clinical syndromes of agoraphobia or post-traumatic stress disorder indicate an instinctive reaction to ward off separation or loss (Sable, 2000). The fear and anxiety of these conditions, evoked by disruptions or trauma, is perceived as heightened attachment behavior such as moving closer to a person or place. Sometimes, however, clients deactivate attachment behavior, for example avoiding closeness, suggesting a different defensive strategy, or attachment style, of handling painful attachment feelings and memories.

Personality Patterns of Attachment

The way individuals talk about themselves and their feelings reveal how they organize their attachment experiences and how they regulate their behavior toward others. This personality pattern, or style, of attachment behavior can help therapists imagine and construct a scenario of their client's early life and can also serve as a guideline for managing the therapeutic relationship. When a developmental pathway veers toward insecurity, attachment behavior has been either over-activated or deactivated. Hazan and Shaver (1987), devised a self-report questionnaire to see whether Ainsworth's classifications of infants in the Strange Situation could be applied to adult romantic relationships. Respondents were asked about their feelings in intimate relationships as well as about their childhood experiences. The researchers found that adults rated insecure could be classified as anxiously-ambivalent about their relationships (over-activated attachment behavior) or avoidant (deactivated attachment behavior). The latter is characterized by a fear of closeness, and a reluctance to feel cared for by others, including the therapist. In contrast, a pattern of anxious-ambivalent attachment is characterized by chronic worry and anxiety over the availability and responsiveness of affectional figures that may make the person appear clinging and emotionally needy. Moreover, Hazan and Shaver found a correlation between the adult's style of attachment behavior and the security of their childhood experiences. An important point that has a bearing on clinical practice was the researchers' conclusion that though personality patterns tend to persist, they can be changed.

Therapists can assist clients in understanding their style of attachment behavior and how their experiences have built on a natural inclination to have enduring bonds with others. They may

have had to regulate their attachment needs in order to keep some degree of accessibility in an uncertain or unreliable situation.

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