



# We all carry within us the fear of disconnection

Every time you start your day, you draw on the emotional attachment processes your brain built as a baby. Perhaps you wish your partner a good day at work, give the dog one last fond pat, confidently place your youngest child in the arms of her childminder, worry whether your older child is going to patch things up with their mates at school, and turn your mind nervously to the meeting you will shortly be having with your manager. All of these experiences travel personalised neural circuits that were not in place when you were born but which you had laid down largely by the time you were one year of age. It is astounding to realise how much of our adult lives are influenced by experiences we had before we could walk, talk, or consciously remember.

Attachment is receiving renewed interest from a wide range of sectors: scientists, medical staff, educational bodies, governmental agencies, lawyers and economists, for a start. We are facing up to the fact that emotions have a much greater influence on our behaviour, thoughts, health, and cultural characteristics than our logical take on the world has traditionally acknowledged. We are realising that we are better placed to address seemingly intractable societal problems, such as prison rates, outcomes for children in care, stress-

related illnesses, and even poverty, by paying closer attention to our children's emotional needs.

In the excitement, though, we risk viewing attachment through the lens of such problematic concerns. I think its value becomes clearer when we understand that attachment processes operate in all our lives, throughout every day, and often in ways of which we have absolutely no awareness. Understanding even some of the science of attachment helps us to become more reflective, compassionate, and creative, as individuals and as a society.

## How can we explain our physiological need of other people?

'Attachment' as a concept was introduced by John Bowlby in the 1950s. Bowlby was a British psychiatrist who became interested in the effect of a child's early experience on their later mental health. Bowlby's knowledge of evolutionary theory helped him to think about how biological drives prompt particular behaviours, and especially how the drive for survival operates in mammal species.

One of the unusual characteristics of the human species is that their young are extremely dependent. They do not walk independently for a year or more, and cannot run steadily until the age of 4 years. They have no hope of defending themselves against a predator without the help of another of their species. How might such vulnerable creatures help to keep themselves safe? This is the drive at the core of each infant's attachment system: how can I help myself to feel as safe as possible in my particular world? What do I need to do to help the adults in my world to love me, to stay close to me, to be interested in my experiences?

Bowlby addressed that question by describing a child's need for 'proximity-seeking', that is the child's need to stay close to the adults they





trust most. Since then, new theorists have used alternative terminology to explain the attachment drive. Sir Harry Burns, Scotland's Chief Medical Officer, describes it as a person's ability to "manage him or herself in stressful situations". Patricia Crittenden, who runs the Family Relations Institute, defines it as the "organization of mental and behavioural strategies for protection of the self and progeny". Dan Hughes, one of the leading international thinkers in healing attachment trauma, brings it down to the core values of "playfulness, acceptance, curiosity, and empathy",

### Sabre tooth tigers and teddy bears

I like to use the terminology of 'sabre tooth tigers' and 'internal teddy bears'. The image of tigers reminds us that a baby's behaviour results from his fear of impending danger and that his fear is not imagined, because it is physiological and thus real. The notion of a 'sabre tooth tiger' helps us adults to take a baby's many moments of fear more seriously.

The language of teddy bears emphasizes the importance of comfort for helping a baby deal with those fears. When a baby has repeated experiences of being comforted in the face of anxiety, then she develops the capacity to keep herself calm,



which links well with the description of Scotland's Chief Medical Officer, to "manage her stress". But learning what comfort is like can only be done with the help of another person, because human brains are so immature at birth. The formal name for the capacity to calm yourself down is 'self-regulation'. The terminology of 'teddy bear' gives us a starting point when such jargon feels complicated. We all know inherently what a teddy bear does, even if you didn't have one.

### Living with too much fear

Many people end up without a strong internal teddy bear. This is a key point of attachment theory: our early emotional experiences have a monumental impact on our later emotional capacities. Many children don't get enough comfort, because the adults around them (whether parents or professionals) don't recognize their behaviour as a cry for help or because the adults themselves feel overwhelmed by a babies' intense emotional needs or because the adults don't have enough time to pay attention to children's feelings.

The anxiety won't kill them. You can survive without a teddy bear, and without the resilient emotional system that comfort gives you. You can survive, but you cannot thrive. You are likely to pay some heavy life prices, as will the people around you. The research has shown repeatedly that babies grow their core teddy bear by the age of one year. If one hasn't taken root by then, then the child-adolescent-adult into whom that baby grows will also have difficulty comforting him or herself. Life becomes harder if you cannot comfort yourself. Healing attachment wounds, later in life, is all about learning how to comfort yourself. Its never too late to grow an internal teddy bear.

*Suzanne*

*Here are some websites to let you read more about the work of any of the people mentioned in this leaflet.*

**John Bowlby** [www.simplypsychology.org/bowlby.html](http://www.simplypsychology.org/bowlby.html)

**Patricia Crittenden** [www.familyrelationsinstitute.org](http://www.familyrelationsinstitute.org)

**Dan Hughes** [www.danielhughes.org](http://www.danielhughes.org)

**Harry Burns** [www.youtube.com/watch?v=VCgf79dOMwY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VCgf79dOMwY)