

THE  
POWER OF  
**ATTACHMENT**

How to Create  
Deep and Lasting  
Intimate Relationships

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## SECURE ATTACHMENT

Although secure attachment can sound out of reach or like a fantasy goal for many of us, it's how we're fundamentally designed to operate. No matter how unattainable it seems, secure attachment is always there, just waiting to be uncovered, recalled, practiced, and expressed. We might lose access to it from time to time, but we never lose our inherent capacity for secure attachment. Over time, we can also learn to embody secure attachment more naturally so that when we get stressed or triggered by something in our lives, we don't automatically follow the insecurely attached thoughts, feelings, and actions that don't serve us well. As we familiarize ourselves more with secure attachment, our relationships become easier and more rewarding—we're less reactive, more receptive, more available for connection, healthier, and much more likely to bring out the securely attached tendencies in others.

So, with all of this good stuff in mind, I want to give you a clear idea of what secure attachment looks like. But first, let's get clear on what secure attachment *isn't*.

My mother used to say, "You have a roof over your head and three meals a day, what are you complaining about?" And some people think that these bare essentials—having a home, food, basic medical care, and so on—are enough. In one way of viewing the world, they're certainly enough, but secure attachment requires a lot more than that.

I needed a lot more than that as a child, as does every child. Secure attachment doesn't mean that we get everything a child could ever want, or that we're spoiled, or that everything always goes right, or that we're never upset by life, or that our parents are absolute saints. And, thankfully, it doesn't mean that we need to be perfect as parents in order to foster secure attachment in our own children.

Ed Tronick is a pioneer in the field of developmental psychology. According to his research, we need to be in attunement with our loved ones just 30% of the time.<sup>1</sup> When you think about it that way, that's a fairly reachable bar. It probably doesn't mean that you can be a terrible parent the other 70% of the time, but I'd say it's a pretty clear message that we can all do our best and relax.

Secure attachment also isn't a type of personality, so I don't want to give you the idea that we're all aiming to be buttoned-down, nice types who take ourselves seriously all the time. Nor is secure attachment a type of delusional optimism that isn't connected to the trials and daily problems of the real world. Okay, so if secure attachment doesn't mean just having one's basic needs met, doesn't require a life of ongoing perfection, and doesn't refer to a type of weirdly cheerful and disconnected person, then what is it? In short, secure attachment is attunement. It reflects a positive-enough environment that creates and engenders basic trust.

Here are some markers to spell it out a little better for you:

**Protection.** Particularly for children, secure attachment means that we feel taken care of and watched over by our parents, who act as our sentinels for safety. They pay attention to what we're doing during the day, know who we're hanging out with, and—depending on our age—make sure that a responsible adult is supervising us when they themselves are not around. That's not something I experienced much of when I was growing up. Times were different, and kids ran free. My parents expected me to be home by six for dinner, but before that particular time, they had little idea of what I was doing, where it was happening, or who I was with. I didn't have playdates and engaged in few after-school activities.

I came home when I was hungry, and my family was mostly clueless about my whereabouts until I told them.

When our parents provide us with a sense of being protected, it primes us to do a better job of taking care of ourselves as we mature. Just as with the relationship between interactive regulation and self-regulation, we learn to take care of ourselves by receiving appropriate protection early on from the important adults in our lives. As adults, we feel secure with our loved ones and community, in addition to engendering a sense of protection for them, as well.

**Presence and Support.** For kids, support means that we have compassionate parents who are on our side. They are present in our lives, they have our backs, and they understand and *get* us. That's the wonderful sense of contingency I mentioned earlier. And with a partner or friend, support means that we enjoy this rarefied space of truly knowing one another and feeling known and appreciated in a way that's genuinely nourishing. We feel that we have people we can completely depend on. Securely attached people naturally seek out support when they need it, in addition to freely offering support to others.

**Autonomy and Interdependence.** As children, we develop autonomy when we receive protection and support from our parents, but not to the degree that they supervise and monitor every little detail of our lives. In other words, parents can do their jobs without going overboard and stifling independence. We can just be kids. When age appropriate, we can go off by ourselves for a while, explore the world, and make our own discoveries and mistakes. And when we come back home, we know that our parents are there for us, available to reconnect and love us just as they always have. They give us the loving space in which to mature, without the perils of constant interaction or of habitual screen time with little or no face-to-face, in-person interactions at all. When we develop the capacity

for positive dependence and the capacity for independence, we gain the true gift of interdependence—where we can give and receive support and love as well as have our needs expressed and met with true mutuality.

The same holds true for our adult relationships. The autonomous aspect of secure attachment means that we can transition fluidly between alone time and together time without it being a big deal. The balance and flow between being together and being apart is just right. Note that I'm not presenting autonomy as synonymous with *isolation* or an over-developed sense of *self-reliance*.

**Relaxation.** Relationships in which we can let our guard down, relax, and be ourselves are invaluable. We can joke with each other, feel spontaneous, and laugh together. Young children absolutely love it when you play with them, enter their world, and have fun together. When the container of a relationship is safe and supportive, all of this can happen naturally, which means that our relationships are characterized by fun and play, lightness and humor. To put it another way: we delight in one another's company, and we look forward to being together because it's just so enjoyable. But this relaxation isn't without boundaries, especially for children. It exists in tandem with age-appropriate limitations and consequences. It's important that kids know that boundaries and closeness can go hand in hand.

**Trust.** Trust is an important topic that is often misunderstood. Most of us have learned to trust certain things about people through our experiences of them. For example, if Jack is always on time, I quickly begin to trust that he will be punctual when I make plans with him. I've learned that Amara always pays me back, Brandon is always there for me in a pinch, and Tyra is a wonderful partner to go on adventures with. I've learned to rely on them for each of these attributes, and that's a nice,

practical kind of trust—but that’s not the kind of trust I’m talking about here.

The trust I’m talking about is a sense that the world is a predominantly good place—a conviction that even in the darkest of times, healing, understanding, and goodness will prevail. This kind of trust typically comes from a positive childhood environment, where we were held and raised most of the time with “good enough parenting,” to use a phrase coined by English pediatrician and psychoanalyst Don Winnicott, which means a positive “holding environment” that engenders basic trust.<sup>2</sup> With this quality of caregiving, we grow up believing that other people are fundamentally good and well-meaning, and we trust that basic fact in our interactions with others.

People who grow up with significant relational wounds, however, often have a confused relationship with trust. Either they don’t trust anyone whatsoever as a blanket policy—distrusting any situation, government, community, personal relationship, and so on—or they have little discrimination at all and blindly trust any and all situations and people who come their way. I call this latter tendency *throwing trust indiscriminately*, and it’s a recipe for disaster. These people regularly get into edgy or dangerous relationships that would set off red flags for other people, and by doing so, they set themselves up to get wounded even further. But when I talk about trust, I’m not talking about something naïve and dangerous, but something fundamentally healing and restorative. It’s a bedrock trust in the basic goodness of life—a fundamental positivity toward what life is all about—but with a ton of healthy discernment. This type of trust empowers and allows for authentic forgiveness. Healing our fundamental sense of trust is a large part of our journey to restoring ourselves in secure attachment.

**Resilience.** It makes a world of difference whether we consider the universe to be malevolent or friendly. How we envision

the world directly influences the way we experience it. When we enjoy a basic trust in the world, it means that we're intrinsically more optimistic and unflappable. We recover from hardships more quickly, and we're able to pull our resources together quite well when trouble eventually hits the proverbial fan. We're better able to access support, ask for assistance, and help ourselves find solutions. In doing so, we learn to trust the world and ourselves even more.

## GATHERING SUPPORT

Now that you know a little more about what secure attachment looks like, I invite you to apply this knowledge as a relational resource. The following exercise involves reviewing your relationships a lot like you did in the exercises in the introduction.

### **EXERCISE** Summoning Secure Attachment

Begin by sitting in a chair and bringing your awareness to your body. Take a moment to feel your feet on the floor and notice your breathing. When you're somewhat grounded, mentally scan the important relationships in your life. Mostly, I want you to look for those people who stand out as representatives of secure attachment. Certain aspects of these people, their behavior, or your interactions with them give you a sense of trust, safety, support, reliability, connection, understanding, and presence. Just notice who shows up. It could be anyone in your past or present—family members, pets, teachers, coaches, therapists, friends, or even strangers.

Gather these people around you. Visualize yourself being surrounded by them in a protective, caring space. What happens with you emotionally when you do this? Do you find yourself becoming more tender, or perhaps more protected and guarded? Do you feel more open or closed than you did before? Where do you feel sensation in your body? Pay attention to what it's like to be with these people. Sense their goodwill and note all the physical and emotional details of this experience.



## FOSTERING SECURE ATTACHMENT IN YOURSELF AND OTHERS

After all this talk about what secure attachment looks like, it's not unusual for people to give themselves a hard time. It seems like such a high bar, and when we look at it that way, it's easy to feel not quite up to snuff. I can relate to that feeling, and I think it's quite normal for everyone to feel that way from time to time.

We all have emotional reactions we're not proud of, and most of us contribute our fair share to arguments and unnecessarily difficult conversations. And many of us simply aren't as present as we'd like to be. We don't feel quite *here* enough—either we're distracted by one thing or another, or we're not as attentive as we think we should be. Again, all of this is normal. Most of these things happen regularly—at least they do for me! The main point is to care enough to notice when things are less than ideal. That means having enough presence to know that things are a little off and enough compassion to want to do a retake, to make things better. There's more wiggle room than you'd think. Remember Ed Tronick's research that I mentioned earlier indicating that being in attunement with our loved ones only 30% of the time could still foster secure attachment?<sup>3</sup> It's okay to goof up, make mistakes, and be less than our perfect self. The attachment system is a forgiving system, and it makes a world of difference to register when we miss each other and mend when things go awry as soon as possible.

We can all do a better job, of course, and that's where practice comes in. So for the rest of this chapter, I want to offer you ways to practice fostering secure attachment in yourself and others. These are methods for boosting your secure attachment skills (SAS). The idea isn't to ace every one of these, but pick out a couple that you feel called to work on and practice these the best you can. Hopefully, there's SAS here for everyone—skills you can offer others in your life, skills to practice mutually in your relationships, and skills to encourage secure attachment in yourself.

### **SAS #1 Listen Deeply**

Let's start with one of the more obvious skills. We all know the value of listening, but most of us haven't actually taken the time to develop our

listening skills in any ongoing way. When we listen deeply, reflect back to the other person, and ask questions that help us understand them, we allow the other person to inform us of what's going on with them—not in a superficial way, but in a manner that empowers them to really dive in, feel their feelings, and express them to us until we truly get them. By listening in this way, we can provide that sense of contingency I spoke of earlier. We're not simply listening until they take a breath so that we can jump into the conversation and say what's on our mind. Listening deeply means that we respond with considerate questions meant to foster and convey understanding, and we always give space before explaining our perspective.

It's important to note that when we listen to another person, we don't have to believe or agree with what they are saying. They could be talking about anything—accusing us of flirting with someone else at a restaurant, or abandoning them at a Christmas party, or forgetting to follow up with something around the house that we promised to do (washing the dishes, for example). Really listening to someone means that we don't immediately respond to what they're saying with denial or criticism. Instead of negating their concern or getting into an argument about it, we just listen. That's it. And we can open up the contingency space even further by trying to resonate with them. “I understand why you'd be upset about that, and I can see that really hurt you,” for example. In other words, listening in this way means you're offering to hold—to contain—whatever it is that they're dealing with and be present with them, regardless of their emotional responses and reactions.

I am continually surprised by the power of listening in my own life. I was teaching in Europe a few years ago, and there were some participants who were unhappy about the way we were running the training. When they brought it up, I did my best to listen and invite any and all to speak about their concerns. As a leader, I think this is extremely important to do. I tried to keep the conversation going until everyone who wanted to say something was able to give voice to their unhappiness, and the process took close to an hour. I tried not to be involved other than just opening the space for their feelings to surface and be heard. When they had finished speaking, I did my best to recap

what I had heard, asked for clarification, and invited them all to take a cappuccino and cookie break while my staff and I met to address the issues that had been brought up.

During our meeting, my team and I took to heart what we'd heard and came up with some direct ways to better support the group. I told the participants what we planned to do for them—taking into account as many requests as possible—and then we moved back into the training itself. Interestingly, when we received the feedback forms after the training was completed, this particular exchange was the thing people appreciated most. They valued having a facilitator and team who would actually listen to them and take the time to address their issues instead of brushing them aside or shutting them down when difficult topics arose. This took place in a culture that is a bit authoritarian, so it made a substantial difference for this group to have leaders who responded openly and without harshness, misuse of power, or criticism. This was an incredibly important lesson for me.

I think most of us have this in common: more than we want to be convinced otherwise or placated, we just really want to be heard on a deep level. That can be hard at times, of course, because relationships can bring up a lot of stuff for us, and it's natural to have challenges when dealing with other people, especially those closest to us. But if we can do our best to listen, we can make the best of difficult situations, and we'll have a much better chance of closing the gap between us and the person we're listening to.

## **SAS #2 Practice Presence**

Listening is one of the ways we can show presence, which is one of the most important gifts we can give ourself and others in relationships. Presence isn't a static thing; it's a way of being. Presence means showing up, paying attention, and letting the other person know that we're there for them with whatever's going on. It means we do our best to put aside our own worries and concerns and be with them in an undistracted way. This can be hard in today's world when it's common to be on our devices so much of the time, but I highly recommend setting your phone or tablet aside when you want to show someone

else that you're truly present for them. Of course, this is impossible to do perfectly all the time, but there are certain things we can do to practice presence in order to become more available to others, as well as to ourself.

I have an acquaintance named Jim who is a busy therapist and coach. He has lots of demands on his time, but he told me that when he goes back home to visit his parents, he tries to leave all his business behind. He doesn't take calls; he doesn't go on the Internet; he doesn't do anything that might distract him from being fully present with his mother and father. Jim does his best to devote those three or four days to them, full-time. He reports that it has utterly transformed their relationship and enabled them to heal quite a bit just from Jim showing up like that.

So I decided to give it a try myself. Before, when I'd go visit my parents, I'd try to catch up on work and get to all the calls and emails I hadn't answered yet. I stopped doing that when I was with them, pledging to be 100% there in a way I hadn't before. I gave my mother pedicures and manicures and watched TV with her, and we enjoyed some valuable and interesting discussions about what was important to her in life, what had meaning, what she regretted, what was funny, and many other topics, including history and fashion. I went on bike rides with my dad and hung out with him in his workshop fixing things—well, he did most of the fixing, but I was there as a companion. I even brought a camera and made a movie, interviewing my parents about their lives. They talked about their siblings, friends, teachers, and parents; their first jobs, first loves, and first kisses; high school dances and the prom. My dad gave me a little more embarrassing info than I had counted on as he explained his early dating rituals behind the ice cream shop where he worked after school. He shared about not being allowed to dance or have parties as a boy due to his strict religious upbringing, and my mom relayed a surprising story about visiting a morgue on prom night on a dare. They both described hanging around the radio as a family and enjoying the early TV programming in the 1950s. In short, I learned a lot of delightful things about them, and being present in this way changed our relationship. We were even able to get some closure on stuff left hanging in our