

A close-up photograph of a man and a woman smiling and looking at each other. The man is on the left, wearing a grey polo shirt, and the woman is on the right, wearing a light-colored top. They are both smiling warmly, creating a positive and intimate atmosphere.

# Handling Conflict in Relationships

LISA FIRESTONE, PH.D.



# Lisa Firestone, Ph.D.

Director of Research and Education - **The Glendon Association**

Senior Editor - **PsychAlive**



PSYCHALIVE



## **2** Parts to this Webinar:

### **Part 1:**

Root Causes of  
Conflict Between  
Couples

### **Part 2:**

Techniques to  
Overcome Conflict

# Conflict in Couple Relationships

Good quality couple relationships have come to be characterized by:

- Positive affect
- Constructive management of conflict
- Healthy sexual relationships

Although good relationships enhance well-being, behaviors such as blame, emotional dysregulation and stonewalling do the opposite.





## How Covid-19 May Impact Couple Relationships

- Relationship science suggests that facing COVID-19-related external stress is likely to increase harmful dyadic processes (e.g., hostility, withdrawal, less responsive support), which will undermine couples' relationship quality.



# Couple Conflict During Covid-19

- Findings suggest that pandemic constitutes a threat to couples' relationship quality and healthy family functioning.
- 34% reported some degree of conflict with their romantic partners due to the spread of COVID-19 and its related restrictions.
- Those experiencing frequent coronavirus-related conflict with their partner were significantly more likely to report decreased frequency of intimate and sexual behaviors.





# Part 1

## Root Causes of Conflict Between Couples



# Three Theories:

- Separation Theory
- Attachment Theory
- Emotion-focused Therapy





# Separation Theory

# Separation Theory

Robert W. Firestone, Ph.D.



Integrates psychoanalytic and existential systems of thought

Two kinds of emotional pain:

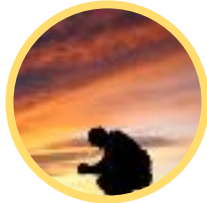
UNDEFENDED



DEFENDED



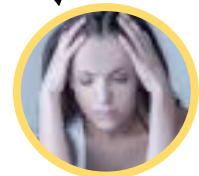
INTERPERSONAL



EXISTENTIAL

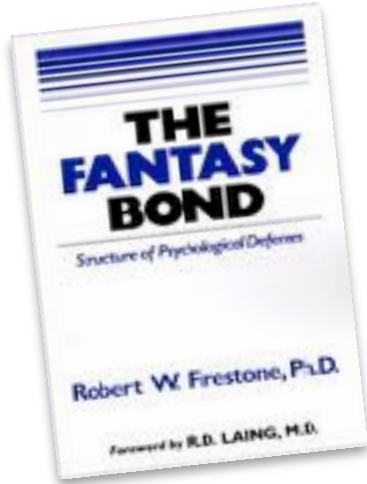


FANTASY BOND



CRITICAL INNER VOICE

# Definition of Fantasy Bond



A **Fantasy Bond** is an illusion of connection, originally an imaginary fusion or joining with the parent. We use the term Fantasy Bond to describe both the original imaginary connection formed during childhood and the repetitive efforts of the adult to continue to make these types of connections in intimate relationships.



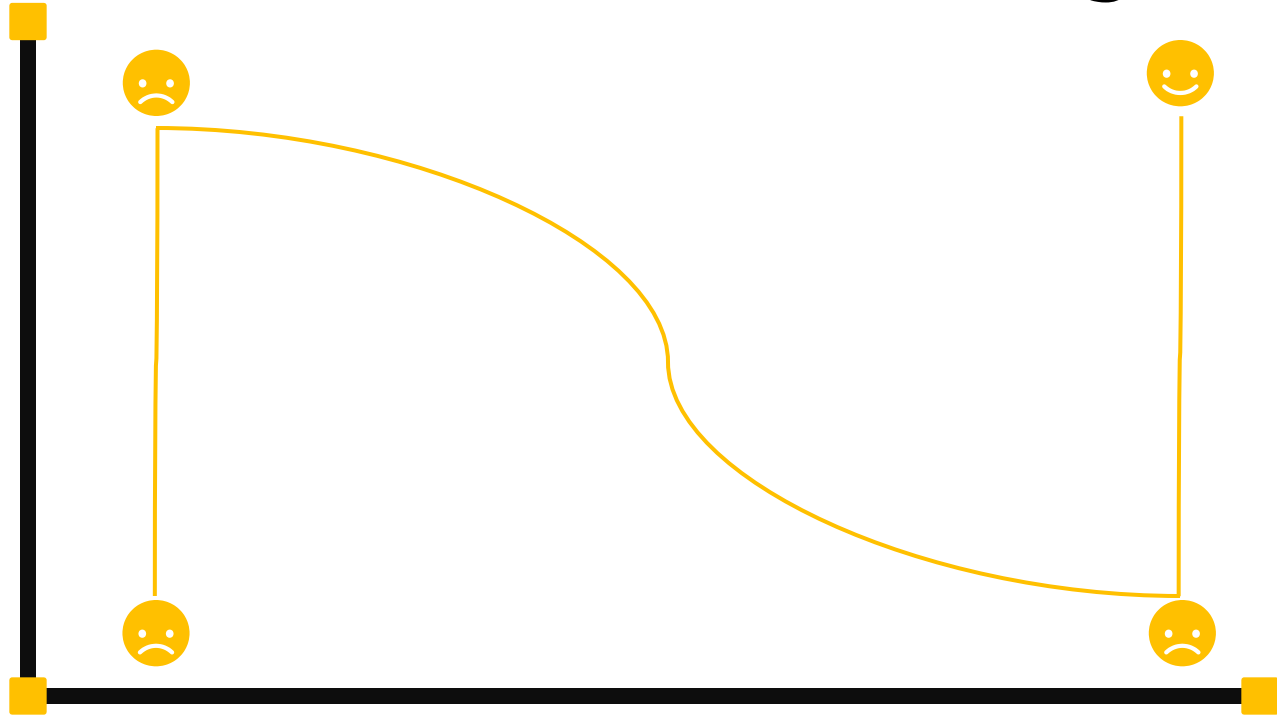
# Formation of a Fantasy Bond

- Originally formed with parent to help relieve early anxiety and emotional pain
- Degree of reliance on a fantasy bond is proportional to the degree of frustration and pain in a person's developmental years
- Process of self-parenting/ self-protection - see and treat ourselves the way we were seen and treated, both punishing and soothing ourselves (pseudoindependence)
- Extends to our adult relationships: fantasy connection substituted for feelings of real love, form replaces substance
- Defenses we form limit our capacity for real love and closeness



# Differentiation and Linkage

**Linkage**  
(emotional  
closeness)



**Differentiation**  
(individuation as an individual)



There is only one proof for the presence of love: the depth of the relationship, and the aliveness and strength in each person concerned; this is the fruit by which love is recognized.

- Erich Fromm

# Do you have a fantasy bond with your partner?

No longer engage  
in loving actions?

Withhold, punish or  
criticize your  
partner?

Have rigid  
behavior  
patterns?

Relate as a  
unit?

Take your partner  
for granted?

Feel like you  
can't live  
without partner?

# Fantasy Bond on a Continuum





# Love breaks a “Fantasy Bond” with our parents

## Relationships:

- Ultimate symbol of growing up
- Represent starting our own lives
- Symbolize a parting from our family
- Letting go on an emotional level
- Differentiating from negative dynamics that plagued our early relationships and shaped our identity



\\

“When we think we have been hurt by someone in the past, we build up defenses to protect ourselves from being hurt in the future. So the fearful past causes a fearful future and the past and the future become one.”

- Alfred Hitchcock

# Psychological Defenses



- Being loved by someone we love and admire threatens our defenses
- Habits we've long had that allow us to feel safe, self-focused or self-contained
- Adaptations to our early environment that aren't adaptive in our adult lives

# Reasons We Defend Against Love

What are we afraid of?



Arouses anxiety and makes us feel vulnerable



Arouses sadness and painful feelings from the past



Provokes a painful identity crisis



Disconnects people from a “fantasy bond” with their parents



Arouses guilt in relation to surpassing a parent



Stirs up existential issues



A close-up photograph of a young man and woman embracing. The woman, with long reddish-brown hair, is in the foreground, her face partially obscured by the man's head as he leans in to hug her. She has a gentle smile. The man has short brown hair and is wearing a blue jacket. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting. A semi-transparent dark rectangle is overlaid on the center of the image, containing white and yellow text.

# Fear of Intimacy

**Interpersonal relationships are the ultimate source of happiness or misery. Love has the potential to generate intense pleasure and fulfillment or produce considerable pain and suffering.**

**- From Sex & Love in Intimate Relationships**



## **As adults, people's defenses may lead them to:**

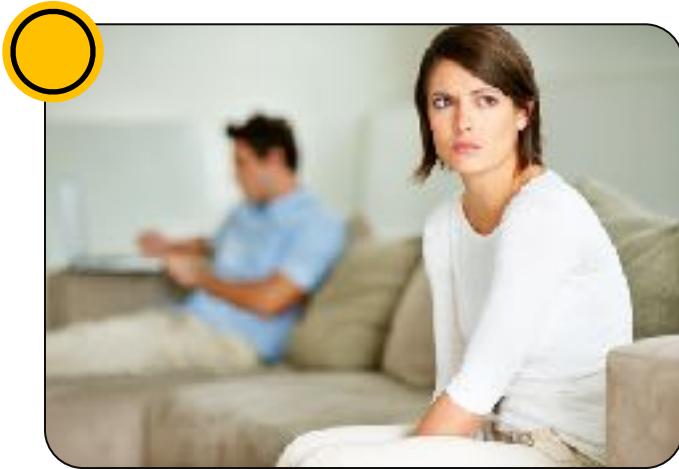
- Repeat patterns they saw in their parents
- Choose someone similar to a person from their past
- Recreate familiar relationship dynamics
- Engage in unhealthy defenses formed as adaptations to painful events

# Distortion:

Why do we distort our partners?

**We tend to distort at points when we become anxious:**

- Reaction to acting against our defenses
- Reaction to love directed toward us
- Fear of intimacy, defense against closeness
- Fear of loss



# Provocation:

## Why do we provoke our partners?

- Reaction to breaking with an old identity
- Pain of getting what we've always longed for
- Challenges defenses
- Discomfort of emotional closeness



# Provocation:

We create our own worst nightmare

- Get them to voice our critical inner voice
- Act in ways that push them away
- Get them to treat us in ways we were treated

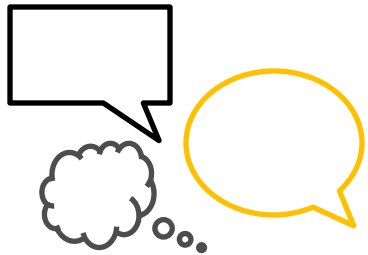




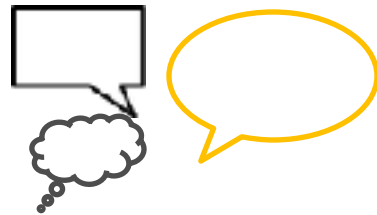
# The Critical Inner Voice

## The Language of the Defensive Process

- Well-integrated pattern of destructive thoughts toward ourselves and others
- At the root of much of our maladaptive behavior
- Fosters inwardness, distrust, self-criticism, self-denial, addictions and a retreat from goal-directed activities
- Affects every aspect of our lives: our self-esteem and confidence, and most importantly, our personal and intimate relationships



# How the Voice Process Impacts Relationships



## **Self-Punishing Voice Process in Relationships:**

**EXAMPLE:** "You can't make anyone happy. You're so unlovable. He/She will never care about you. You'll just wind up alone."

## **Self-Soothing Voice Process in Relationships:**

**EXAMPLE:** "You are just fine on your own. You can take care of yourself. You don't need anyone else. Don't trust him/her."



# Common “Voices” in Relationships

## Voices About Yourself:

- Don't get too hooked on her.
- He doesn't really care about you.
- She is too good for you.
- You're better off on your own.
- As soon as he gets to know you, she'll reject you.
- **Don't be too vulnerable. You'll just get hurt.**

## Voices About Your Partner:

- You shouldn't be vulnerable.
- She only cares about being with her friends.
- He is probably cheating on you.
- She's too needy.
- He's going to leave you.





# Attachment Theory

# What is Attachment Theory?

How do I get these  
people to take care  
of me?



# Understanding Attachment

- Attachment patterns are formed in infancy, during the first two years of life.
- Once established, it is a pattern that affects us throughout our lives, particularly in how we relate in intimate relationships and with our children.



# Internal Working Models

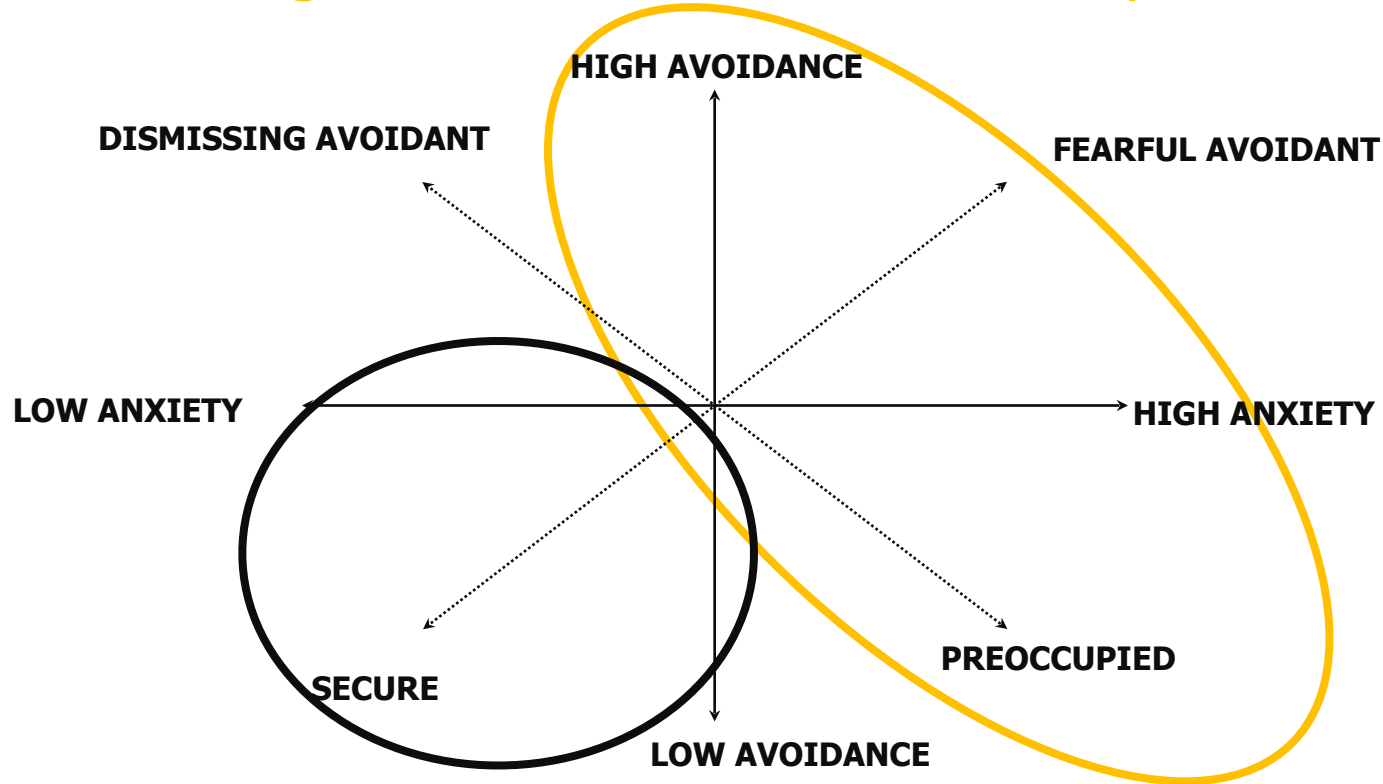
Our early relationships provide a template for how relationships go. Can I depend on others? Will they soothe me when I need it? Will they see me for who I really am?

---



# Adult attachment 'styles':

Regions in a two-dimensional space



From: "Secure and Insecure Love: An Attachment Perspective" Phillip R. Shaver, Ph.D.

Adapted from Ainsworth et al. (1978), Bartholomew & Horowitz (1991), Fraley & Shaver (2000)

# Is Your Attachment Style Affecting Your Relationship?

## **Secure Attachment:**

Tend to be more satisfied in their relationships

## **Preoccupied Attachment:**

Tend to be desperate to form a fantasy bond. Instead of feeling real love or trust toward their partner, they often feel emotional hunger



# Is Your Attachment Style Affecting Your Relationship?

## **Dismissive Attachment:**

Have the tendency to emotionally distance themselves from their partner

## **Fearful-Avoidant Attachment:**

Live in an ambivalent state in which they're afraid of being too close to or too distant from others



# Couple Conflict From An Attachment Perspective

- The experience of conflict in romantic relationships is highly stressful.
- Conflict has significant implications for relationship satisfaction and longevity.
- Severe and persistent conflict can activate the attachment behavioral system.
- Responses to conflict are shaped, in part, by individual differences in attachment.
- Both partners' conflict responses mediate the attachment-relationship quality link.



# Attachment Styles and Relationship Problems

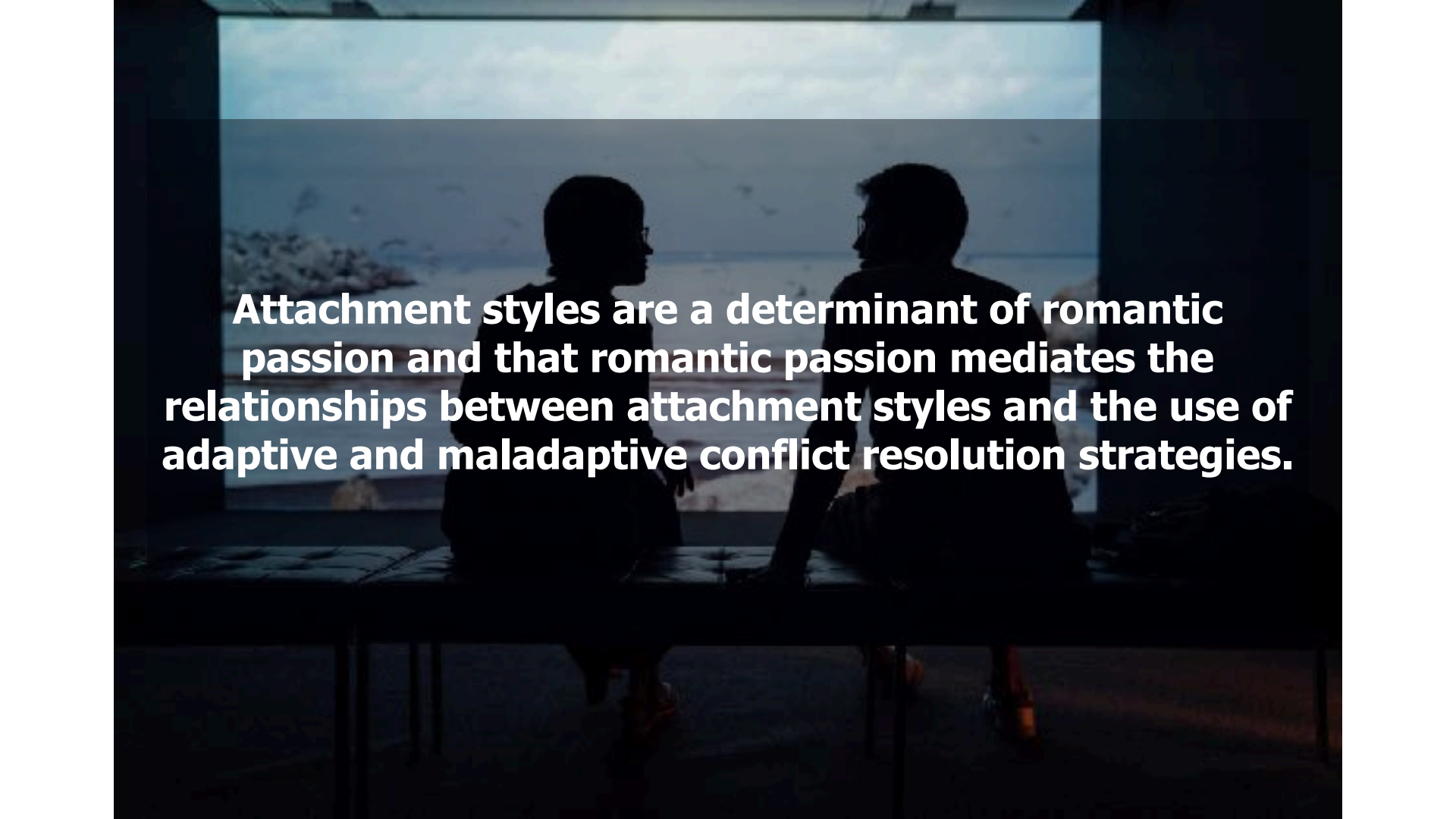
- Anxious and Avoidant styles were associated with greater problems in the marital relationship.
- Couples who exhibited a Secure attachment style tended to be involved in relationships characterized by greater interdependence, trust, commitment, and satisfaction whereas those with insecure styles tended to be characterized by more problems.

Source: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12931932/>



# Attachment, Conflict, and Relationship Quality

- Attachment anxiety and avoidance shape individuals' responses to couple conflict.
- Attachment insecurities and associated conflict behaviors erode relationship quality.
- Attachment-related interventions help reduce conflict and foster emotional connection.

A photograph showing the silhouettes of a man and a woman sitting on a dark, tufted bench. They are facing each other, looking out at a bright, hazy beach scene with waves and a cloudy sky. The scene is backlit, creating a soft glow around the figures.

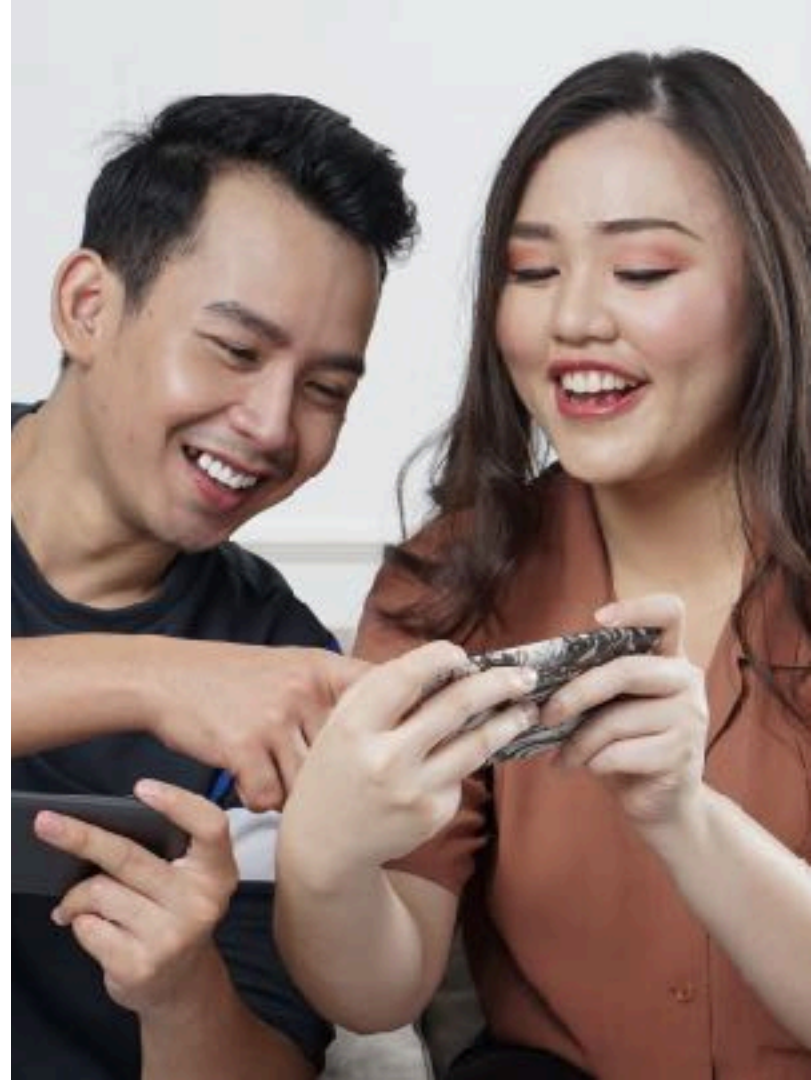
**Attachment styles are a determinant of romantic passion and that romantic passion mediates the relationships between attachment styles and the use of adaptive and maladaptive conflict resolution strategies.**



# Attachment and Relationships

- Attachment anxiety and avoidance are related to deficits in caring for relationship partners and engaging in altruistic behavior. (e.g., Kuncle & Shaver, 1994; Gillath et al., 2005).
- **Preoccupied people** tend to be self-focused when engaged in supposedly caring/altruistic actions, leading to intrusiveness, poor assessment of others' actual needs, and personal distress.
- **Dismissive people** tend to be less interested in helping others and to derogate needy others. They are relatively deficient in the domain of compassion and love.

From: "Secure and Insecure Love: An Attachment Perspective" Phillip R. Shaver, Ph.D.



# Upcoming Webinar Series

## Understanding Attachment: A Webinar Series

Date: Four one-hour sessions (Dec. 8, Jan. 12, Jan. 26, Feb. 9)  
Price: \$15 per webinar (\$45 for all four webinars)

In This Series: Attachment patterns act as invisible forces helping shape our lives, particularly our closest relationships. Our early attachment patterns are formed in childhood, but they become models for how we expect relationships to work throughout our lives. Once established, they have a significant influence on everything from how we relate to our partner.

[Learn More](#)

[Sign Up](#)



*CE Credits Available*





# Emotion-Focused Therapy



adaptive

Fear



maladaptive

adaptive



Anger

maladaptive





Where maladaptive  
emotions come from  
How we develop  
negative schemas





# Schemas:

Experiences we have become schemas (feelings, actions, beliefs)

- Develop while growing up
- Triggered by current events
- Lead to maladaptive reactions



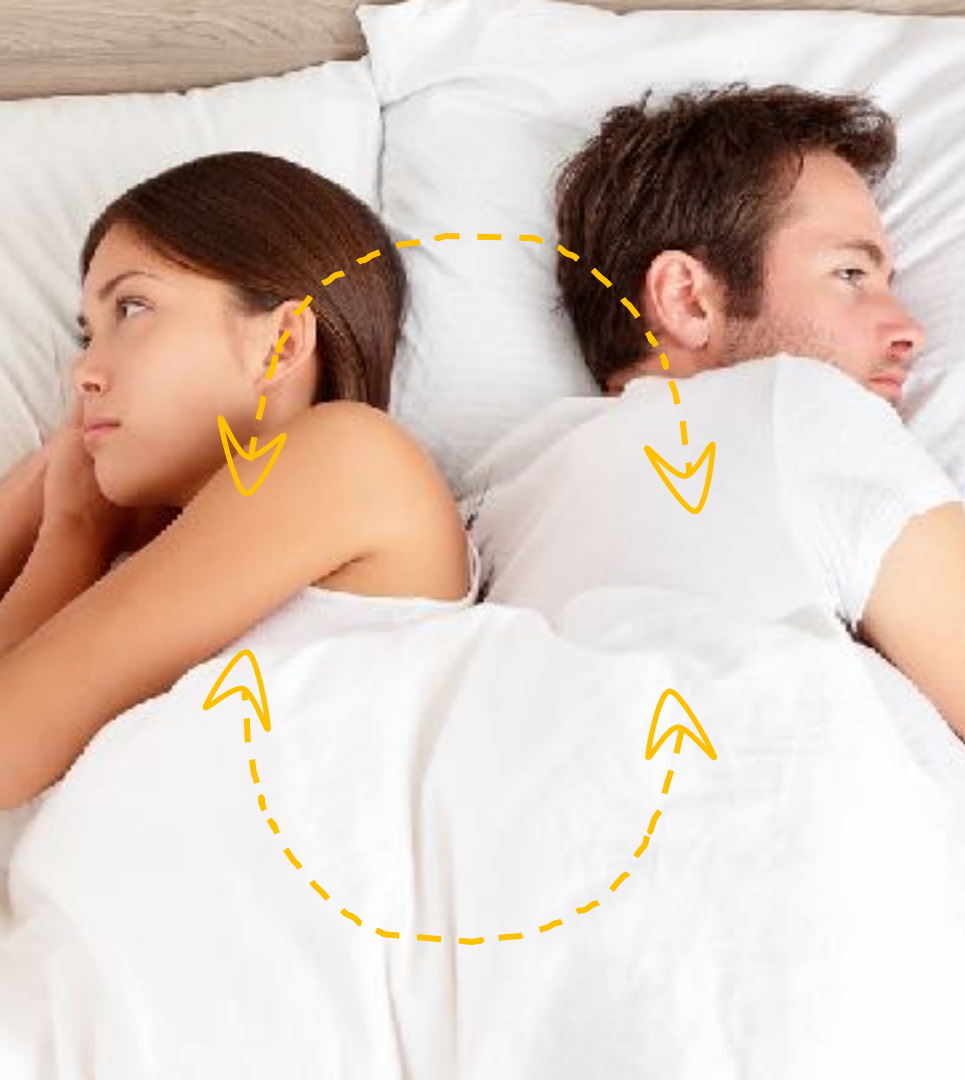
# Two Main Conflicts

## Attachment

- Pursuer/ Distancer

## Identity

- Dominant/ Submissive



# Perpetuating Cycles

- Both partners push or provoke in ways that encourage the other person to play the other half of old, familiar dynamics.
- Relationship starts to look more like those of their past.
- Reinforces each partner's working model, confirming what they already believe about love and relationships.



A man and a woman are sitting on a light-colored couch, facing each other. The woman, on the left, has dark hair in a ponytail and is wearing a dark sleeveless top. She is holding a black mug with both hands. The man, on the right, has short brown hair and is wearing a blue polo shirt. He is also holding a black mug with both hands. They are both looking at each other with serious expressions. The background is a blurred indoor setting with a white shelf holding some items.

# Part 2

## Techniques to Overcome Conflict



Your task is not to seek for love,  
but merely to seek and find all  
the barriers within yourself that  
you have built against it.

-Rumi

- Recognize and admit you have a fantasy bond
- Take steps to break a fantasy bond



# To break free from a fantasy bond we must:

- Leave our own inward world and challenge our self-nourishing and punishing habits
- Redirect our energy toward taking chances on finding satisfaction in the external world through goal-oriented behavior





# Actions that counter a fantasy bond:

1. Express love in a way your partner would experience as loving.
2. Be affectionate.
3. Slow down. Be kind and present.
4. See partner for who they are.
5. Make eye contact.
6. Try something old.
7. Try something new.
8. Break routine.
9. Avoid passivity and control.
10. Talk as an "I" instead of a "we."
11. Be aware of your critical inner voice.



# Relate and interact!

Joke around.

Talk personally.

Continue to let your partner know you.



Ask questions.

Listen.

Express interest.

Continue to get to know your partner.



# Be generous!

Notice when something  
is needed

Lend a helping hand

Give a sensitive gift



Offer an ear to listen  
or a shoulder to lean on

Make a thoughtful  
gesture

Express affection!



Accept affection!

# **Taking Responsibility for Your Half of the Dynamic**

Think about what your partner does that you don't like.  
Then, think about what you do right beforehand.



# Goals for Your Relationship

- Write down any goals you have for yourself and what kind of relationship you want. What would the relationship look like? Do you want more closeness? More independence?
- How could you go about achieving these goals? List the actions you will take.
- What actions will you take when you feel triggered? How can you return to the underlying want?
- How will you express this want to your partner?
- What actions will you take to make your partner feel understood?



# Unilateral Disarmament

The technique of Unilateral Disarmament does not imply that you are surrendering your point of view, taking the blame or deferring to your partner's opinion. It simply indicates that you value being close to your partner more than winning your point.



# The Firestone Voice Scale for Couples

## FVSC

### Instructions

All people experience thoughts that are critical towards themselves and others. For example, when a person is worried about his (her) relationship, he (she) might think:  
"You'd better hang onto him (her). This may be your last chance. You may never get anybody again."

Or a person might have critical thoughts about a potential partner:  
"Don't get involved. You might get hurt because he (she) is so unreliable."

Negative thoughts are a part of everyone's thinking process. Please indicate the frequency with which you experience the following thoughts by circling the corresponding number.

**1 – NEVER 2 – RARELY 3 – ONCE IN A WHILE 4 – FREQUENTLY 5 – MOST OF THE TIME**

For example, you think or say to yourself:

**1 2 3 4 5     "You're unattractive. Why should she (he) want to go out with you?"**

- |    |                                                                                               |   |   |   |   |   |
|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | You'd better put on a good front. Put your best foot forward or he (she) won't be interested. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. | You'd be better off on your own.                                                              | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. | He (She) doesn't give a damn about you.                                                       | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. | He (She) never spends time with you. He (She) is always with his (her) friends/family.        | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. | He (She) doesn't want to hear your opinions, so keep them to yourself.                        | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |



# You in Your Relationship: Your Critical Inner Voice/The Real You

■ **What my critical inner voice  
says about me in my  
relationship**

---

---

---

---

■ **What I realistically think  
about myself in my  
relationship**

---

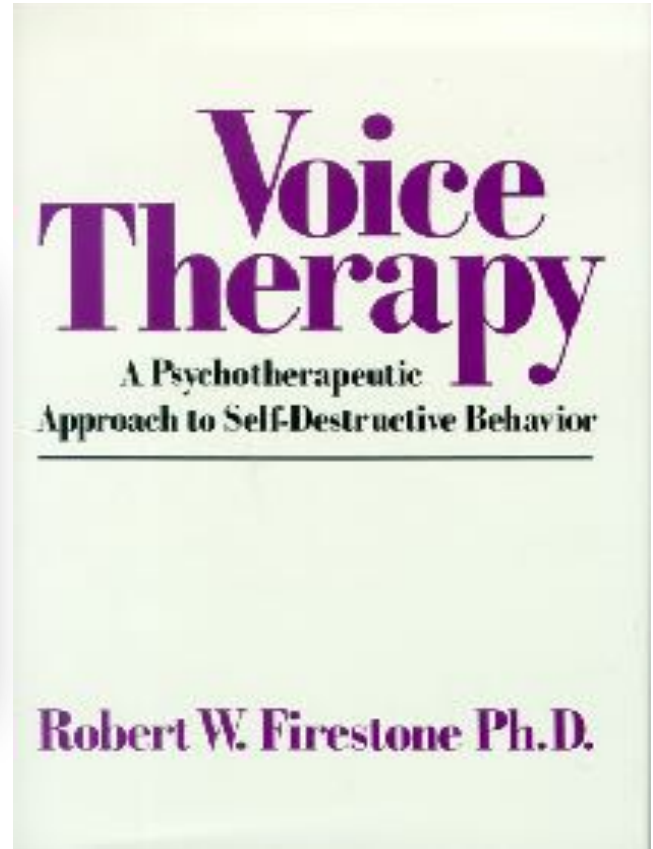
---

---

---

# Voice Therapy

Cognitive/ Affective/ Behavioral  
Approach



# Voice Therapy:

## Steps in the Therapeutic Process with Couples

1. Formulating the problem
2. Verbalizing the voice and releasing affect
3. Developing insight about the source of the voice
4. Answering back to the voice
5. Developing insight about how voices are influencing behaviors
6. Planning corrective suggestions for changing behavior
7. Sharing voices with each other between sessions

If you are interested in attending a voice therapy training or in getting training materials please contact [jina@glendon.org](mailto:jina@glendon.org) or visit [www.glendon.org](http://www.glendon.org).

# Developing Secure Attachment

- Relationship with a partner with a secure attachment pattern
- Therapy
- Coherent narrative



On-Demand  
eCourses



An eCourse with Drs.  
Dan Siegal & Lisa Firestone

## Making Sense of Your Life:

Understanding Your Past to Liberate Your  
Present and Empower Your Future

What could be more important than understanding your story and how it shapes who you are? In this eCourse, Drs. Dan Siegel and Lisa Firestone will draw upon the latest neurobiological research, attachment theory and their clinical experience to guide you through the process of creating a coherent narrative in order to make sense of your life.

[Learn More](#)

# Transforming Emotions in Your Relationships

- Identify unacknowledged emotions/ vulnerability (wants and needs) behind reactions
- Express both the universal want/need and specific want/need
- Helps the person feel more vulnerable, and the partner to respond with more feeling and sensitivity





On-Demand  
eCourses



An eCourse with Drs. Les  
Greenberg & Lisa Firestone

## The Power of Emotion:

An Emotional Education for Individuals,  
Couples & Therapists

Emotions guide your life, understanding them can transform your life! This eCourse with Drs. Les Greenberg and Lisa Firestone offers a clear, comprehensive, and enlightening guide to understanding the importance of emotions.

[Learn More](#)

# Emotions and Needs

<b>A. Frustrating Patterns</b>	<b>B. Secondary Feelings</b>	<b>C. Reactive Patterns</b>	<b>D. Primary Emotion* (Fear/Shame/ Sadness/Anger)</b>	<b>E. Needs Global/ Specific</b>
When you...	I feel...	And react by...	This obscures my...	What I really want is...
Are late	Angry	Criticizing	Anxiety and feeling rejected	To feel important to you/ You to call

**Fill in the following sentences with your emotions and needs.**

- When you...
- I feel...
- And react by... \_\_\_\_\_
- This obscures my...\_\_\_\_\_
- What I really want (generally) is...
- What I really want (specifically) is...

# Healthy Communication

What's going on in you when you talk to your partner? What do you feel?

- Verbal signals
  - Body language
  - Tone
  - Timing
  - Volume
  - Intensity
- 



# Healthy Communication


**From Parenting from the Inside Out**  
**Dr. Daniel Siegel**

- Awareness
- Attunement
- Empathy
- Expression
- Joining
- Clarification
- Sovereignty





# Look Inside Yourself

- If you polarize, do the opposite
  - Be open to new things
  - Think about how it feels and not how it looks
  - See partner and self through a realistic and compassionate perspective
  - Be open to feedback
- 

# Ways to Help Your Relationship

- Identify your attachment and create a coherent narrative.
- Reveal destructive thought processes to each other.
- Keep a journal. Out your inner coach.
- Set goals for the relationship. Monitor your behavior.
- Use the tools:
  - ✓ Disarm.
  - ✓ Be generous.
  - ✓ Don't board the train of destructive thoughts.



# Webinars



Visit [psychalive.org](https://psychalive.org) for a full list of archived and upcoming Webinars

# eCourses



Visit [ecourse.psychalive.org](https://ecourse.psychalive.org) for a full  
list of online courses.

# CE Information

CE's for this Webinar are optional and sold separately through R. Cassidy Seminars. A link to purchase 1.5 CE's will be e-mailed to registrants following the live Webinar. For those purchasing or watching this Webinar as an archived recording, a link to purchase home study CE's was provided with your purchase confirmation. Registrants can earn 2 home study CE's by watching the Webinar and completing a reading assignment.

# Thank you!

Any questions?

**Lisa Firestone, Ph.D.**

lfirestone@glendon.org

**Contact:**

Glendon@Glendon.org

800-663-5281