

UNDERSTANDING DISMISSIVE- AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT

with Lisa Firestone, Ph.D.



WELCOME



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THIS WEBINAR WILL EXPLORE:

- ▶ What is Dismissive-Avoidant Attachment?
- ▶ How does this attachment pattern develop?
- ▶ What impact does this attachment pattern have on relationships (i.e. who you choose and how you behave)?
- ▶ Techniques to break free from negative cycles, develop inner security, and achieve closer, more fulfilling relationships
- ▶ Tools to enhance tolerance for emotional closeness



ATTACHMENT THEORY?



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

SECURE vs INSECURE AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT

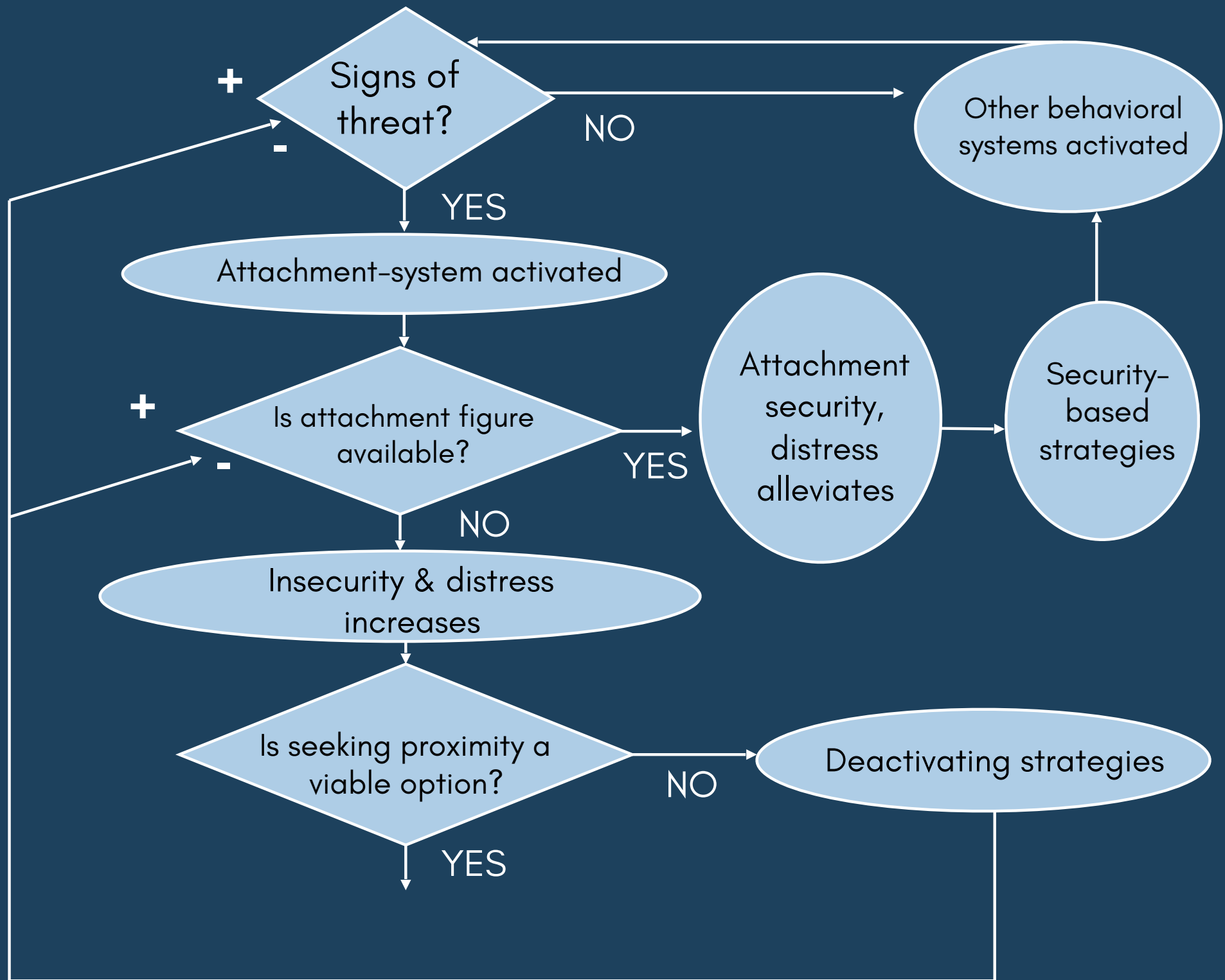
ATTACHMENT STYLE

- ▷ Secure
- ▷ Insecure – avoidant



PARENTAL INTERACTIVE PATTERN

- ▷ Emotionally available, perceptive, responsive (Safe, seen, soothed)
- ▷ Emotionally unavailable, imperceptive, unresponsive, and rejecting
- ▷ Don't feel attuned to, seen or soothed
- ▷ Feel shame at not being "important enough" to be attuned to, so put needs below level of awareness to not feel the shame



IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING YOUR ATTACHMENT HISTORY

- ▶ **EARLY EXPERIENCES** profoundly shape who we are.
- ▶ **BECOME A LENS** through which we see the world
- ▶ **WITHOUT THIS UNDERSTANDING** of how our past affects the present, we often unconsciously *recreate*, *repeat*, or *react to* our early environment.
- ▶ **IMPROVES YOUR HEALTH** – actually reduces cellular aging.



HOW DOES AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT MANIFEST IN ADULTHOOD?



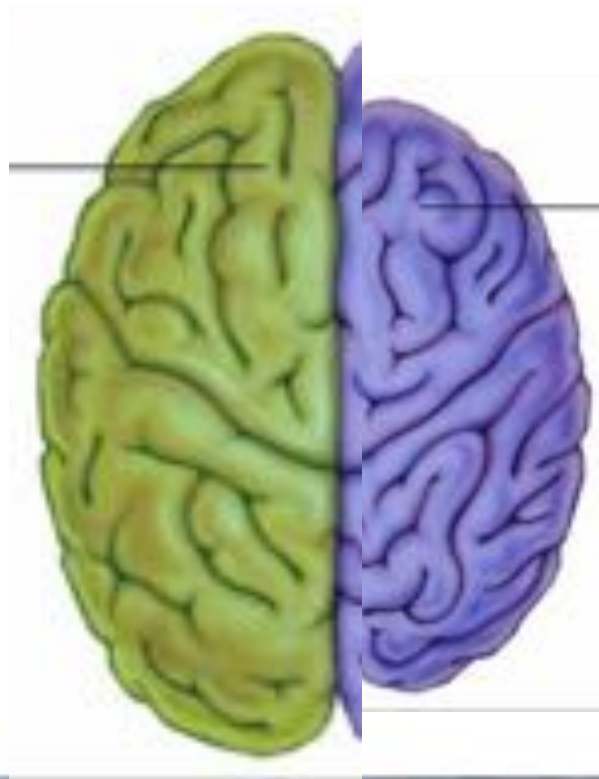
VIDEO

Avoidant Attachment



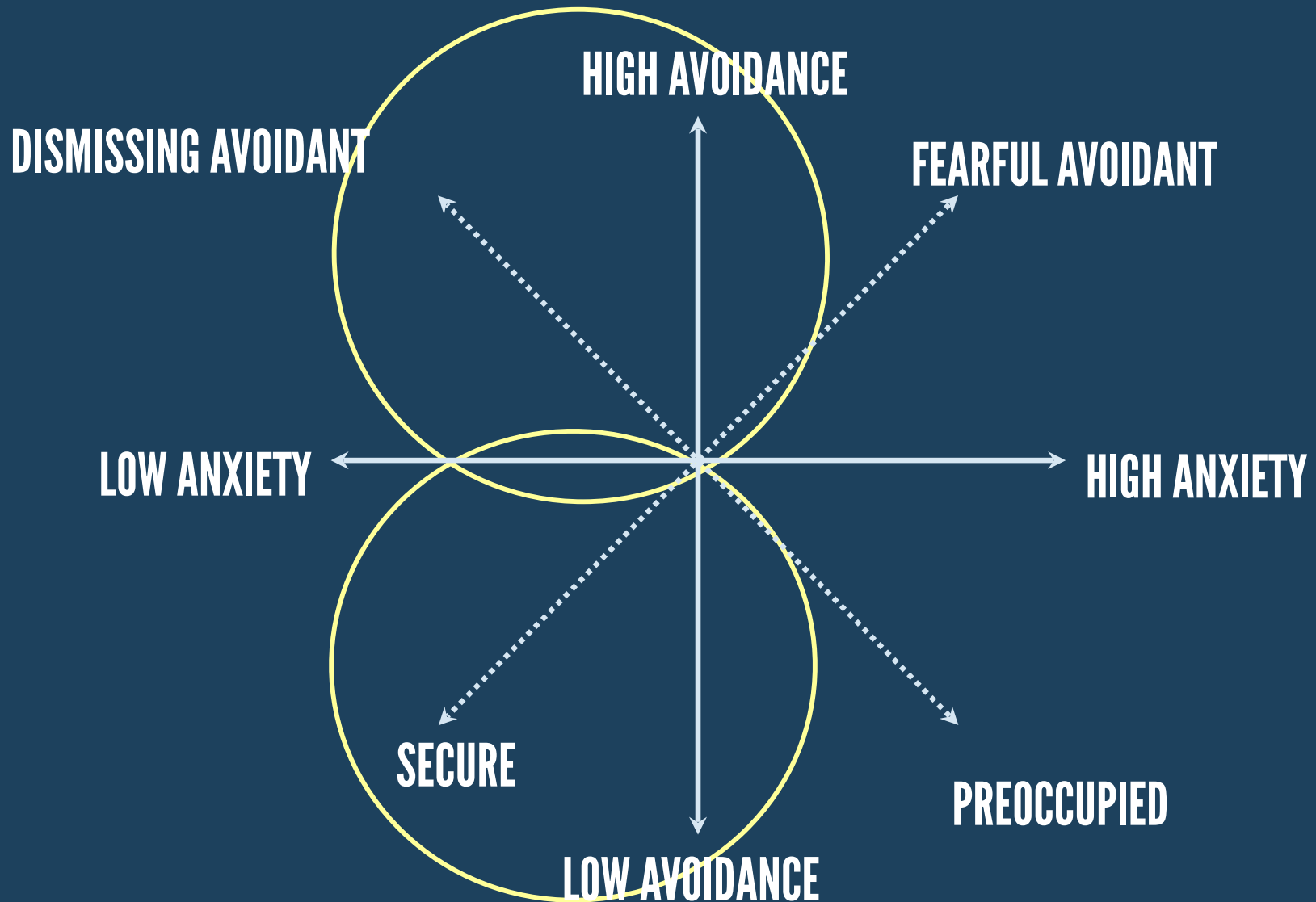
Avoidant Attachment

- Left side of the brain becomes more dominant
- This can lead to a disconnected emotional life
- Narratives tend to have a lack of access to autobiographical memories and an insistence that everything was fine



ADULT ATTACHMENT STYLES:

REGIONS IN A 2-DIMENSIONAL SPACE



When Attachment Patterns Activate

Highly avoidant people are not always unsupportive, withdrawn, or uncooperative in their romantic relationships; instead, the defining attributes of avoidance are elicited by certain types of stressful situations, such as feeling pressure to give or receive support, to become more emotionally intimate, and/or to share deep personal emotions.

Dismissive-avoidant:

"I'd rather not depend on others or have others depend on me!"



Self-Report Attachment Measure

(Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998)

Avoidance (18 items, $\alpha > .90$)

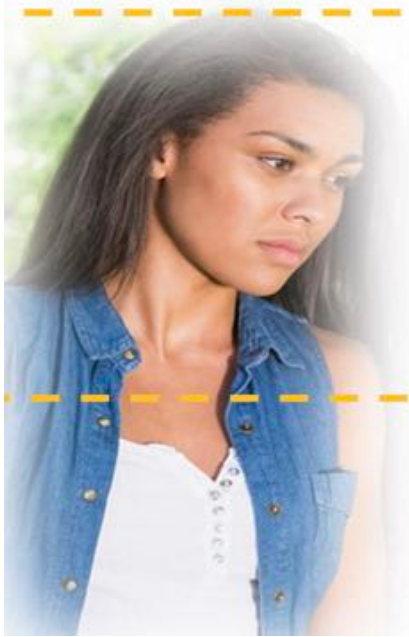
1. I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down.
2. I try to avoid getting too close to my partner.
3. I feel comfortable depending on relationship partners. (reverse-scored)
4. I turn to a relationship partner for many things, including comfort and reassurance. (reverse-scored)



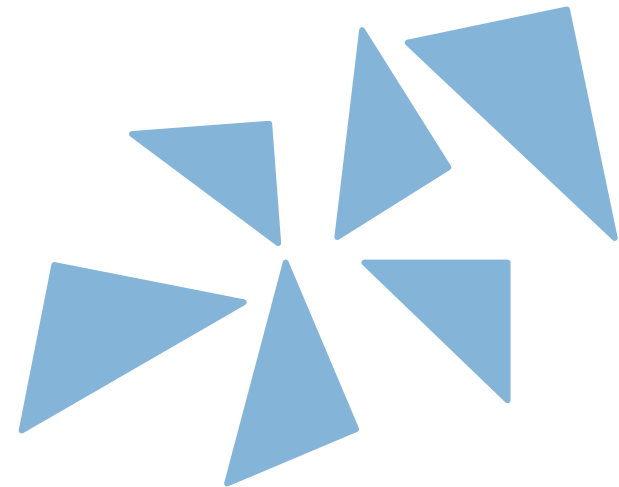
DISMISSIVE-AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT IN RELATIONSHIPS:

Have learned to keep their own needs below their level of awareness and to take care of themselves. In relationships, they maintain emotional distance and tend to experience their partner's bids for connection as needy or childish. They feel like they are self-sufficient and pseudo-independent.

Dismissive-Avoidant Attachment in Relationships



Dismissive-avoidantly attached people tend to select partners who are more emotional or intrusive which reinforces their need to shut down



ATTACHMENT AND CAREGIVING

Studies have shown that attachment anxiety and avoidance are related to:

- ▶ Deficits in caring for relationship partners
- ▶ Engaging in altruistic behavior

(e.g., Kuncle & Shaver, 1994; Gillath et al., 2005).

AVOIDANT PEOPLE TEND TO BE:

- ▶ Less interested in helping others
- ▶ Derogate needy others
- ▶ Relatively deficient in the domain of compassion and love



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

Dismissive-Avoidant Attachment and Sexuality

Avoidant attachment style favors emotional suppression, and a lack of self-disclosure to a partner (Brassard et al., 2015). Thus, those with insecure attachment styles are more likely to engage in casual sex and promiscuity, and often experience low levels of commitment and intimacy (Dempster, et al., 2015).



VIDEO

Avoidant Attachment



ATTACHMENT PATTERNS AND PARENTING

Dismissive Avoidant Attachment:

associated with less sensitive parenting, perpetuating an intergenerational cycle of dismissive-avoidant attachment



Psychological Defenses



- Meeting someone who's attuned and responsive can be challenging as it stirs up old pain
- Being loved by someone threatens one's defenses.
- Adaptations to our early environment that aren't adaptive in our adult lives
- Long-held habits that allow us to feel safe, self-focused or self-contained

Critical Inner Voice

The language of our defenses

The critical inner voice is a well-integrated pattern of destructive thoughts toward ourselves and others.

The nagging “voices” that make up this internalized dialogue are at the root of much of our self-destructive and maladaptive behavior.

The critical inner voice is not an auditory hallucination; it is experienced as thoughts within your head.

This stream of destructive thoughts forms an anti-self that discourages individuals from acting in their best interest.



Critical Inner Voice and Dismissive Attachment

Don't open up.

You don't need
this person

They're being so
needy/childish.

You need
some space.

You're just fine
on your own.

Why are they
bothering you
all the time?

STRATEGIES TO DEVELOP MORE SECURE ATTACHMENTS



- **Identify your pattern**
- **Form a coherent narrative**
- **Work on your pattern in therapy**
 - Find a therapist with attachment expertise
- **Develop earned security in a relationship**
 - Engage with secure partners
 - Practice tools to build your own tolerance for intimacy
 - If you're not with someone secure, go to couples' therapy

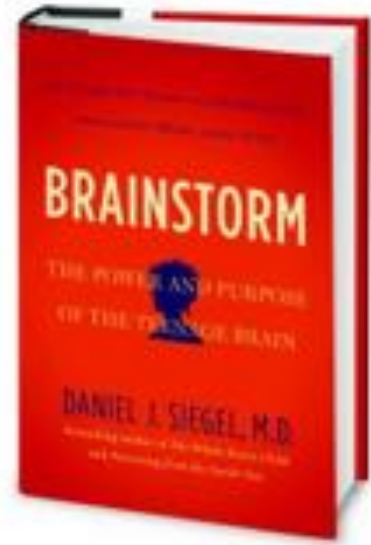
From: "https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_stop_attachment_insecurity_from_ruining_your_love_life"

1. IDENTIFY YOUR PATTERN



QUESTIONS FOR SELF-REFLECTION

The following questions are designed for self-reflection, guiding you to think about your early life experiences. These questions were adapted from Dr. Dan Siegel's book *Brainstorm*. In your journal, write responses to each of the following questions. Your responses can be as long or as short as you like.



FAMILY BACKGROUND

Who was in your family? Include significant adults, siblings, etc.

What was it like growing up in your family?

What was your parents' philosophy about raising children?

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS AND ATTACHMENT

Was there anyone in your life, other than your parents, who served as a parental figure or to whom you felt attached? Please state a few words to reflect your relationship with those individuals as well.

What were the major conflicts in your family? Did you have conflict with anyone?

Was there anyone you could turn to or any place you could go to help you feel comforted during difficult times?

CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

Did you ever experience a long separation from your parents in childhood? What was that like for you?

How were you disciplined as a child?

Have you ever felt threatened by your parents?

Have you ever felt rejected by your parents?

LOOKING BACK ON YOUR EARLY RELATIONSHIPS

Choose five adjectives or words that reflect your relationship with your mother or mother-like figure. Try to think back as far as you can remember to your early childhood.

Now, try to think of a memory or an incident that would illustrate each of the words you chose to describe the relationship. Write these memories or incidents down.

ADJECTIVE 1:

MEMORY :

ADJECTIVE 2:

MEMORY :

ADJECTIVE 3:

MEMORY :

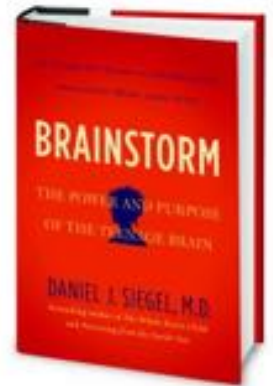
ADJECTIVE 4:

MEMORY :



Reflect on Your Attachment Models

- Look over your responses to the “Questions for Self-Reflection” and “Look Back on Your Early Relationships” exercises. As you read through your responses, think about the attachment model or models you have experienced in your life. Were they secure, avoidant, ambivalent, and/or disorganized? Remember, many of us have experienced more than one of these attachment models.
- Keep in mind that, as Dr. Dan Siegel writes in *Brainstorm*, “Your attachment model is a summary of how you’ve adapted to the relationships you’ve had with the important people in your life. It’s not however, a sign of some problems to have inside you – it’s merely a reflection of a learned response to real-life events, to your actual relationship in your early days.”
- We invite you to reflect on your attachment models in your journal. Consider how your early relationships and the attachment models you developed in response shape how you connect with others today.



Siegel, D. J. (2017). *Brainstorm: the power and purpose of the teenage brain*. Vancouver, B.C.: Langara College.

2. FORM A COHERENT NARRATIVE



Writing a Coherent Narrative

- “It’s never too late to bring both hemispheres [of your brain] into development and activity.” ~Dr. Dan Siegel
- Writing a coherent narrative integrates your brain by drawing upon the right side of your brain for autobiographical memories and deep emotions, as well as the left side of your brain for language, logic and linear storytelling.
- Make sense of the nonsense.



**FEEL THE FULL PAIN OF YOUR
CHILDHOOD AND MAKE SENSE OF IT.**



Why is it important to make sense of your life?

Research shows that with self-reflection and understanding, we can free ourselves from the limitations of our upbringing.

Making sense of our lives by writing a coherent narrative allows us to have a sense of who we've been, who we are now, and who we'd like to become.

"Research reveals that the more coherent a narrative we have of our own attachment issues in childhood, the more we've made sense of how our early life experiences have shaped us, the more likely our children will have a secure attachment to us and the more rewarding in general our interpersonal relationships will be." ~ Dr. Dan Siegel

"When we create a narrative of who we are, we link past and present so we can become the active author of a possible future, too." ~ Dr. Dan Siegel



FORMING A STORY:

The Health Benefits of Narrative

~ James Pennebaker & Janel Seagal, Journal of Clinical Psychology, 1999

"Writing about personal experiences in an emotional way for as little as 15 minutes over the course of three days brings about improvements in mental and physical health."

"...writing serves the function of organizing complex emotional experiences."

"...the formation of a narrative is critical and is an indicator of good mental and physical health."

"Forming a story about one's experiences in life is associated with improved physical and mental health across a variety of populations."



TIPS FOR WRITING A COHERENT NARRATIVE

- ▷ Write as an adult.
- ▷ Write rationally.
- ▷ Write autobiographically.
- ▷ Write intuitively.
- ▷ Write with feeling.
- ▷ Write about how the past influences your present.
- ▷ Write with balance.
- ▷ Write with self-compassion.



MINDFULNESS

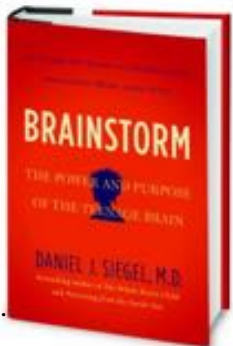
Mindfulness helps integrate the brain for all attachment patterns.



PRACTICE INTEGRATING YOUR BRAIN

AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT:

- ▷ Become aware of non-verbal signals. Try watching TV without the sound on.
- ▷ Build autobiographical memories. Write down the details of what you did today.
- ▷ Pay attention to any desires you have to be closer to people in your life. Reach out to another person to express your feelings of wanting to connect.
- ▷ Drawing from the right side of your brain.



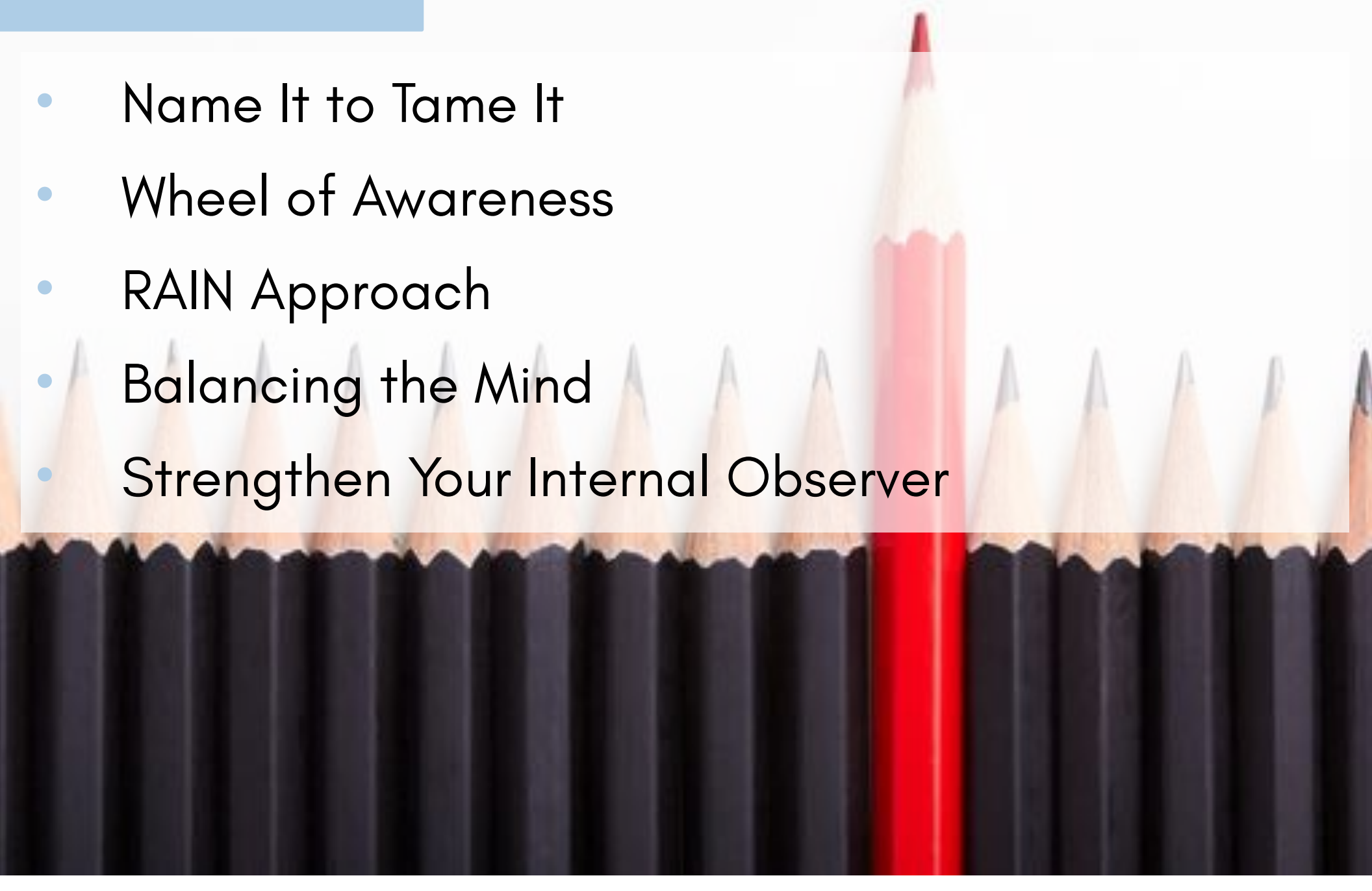
PRACTICES FOR OVERCOMING AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT

- Share your thoughts and emotions when you feel the urge to stifle them.
- Ask people about their feelings and truly listen to their response.

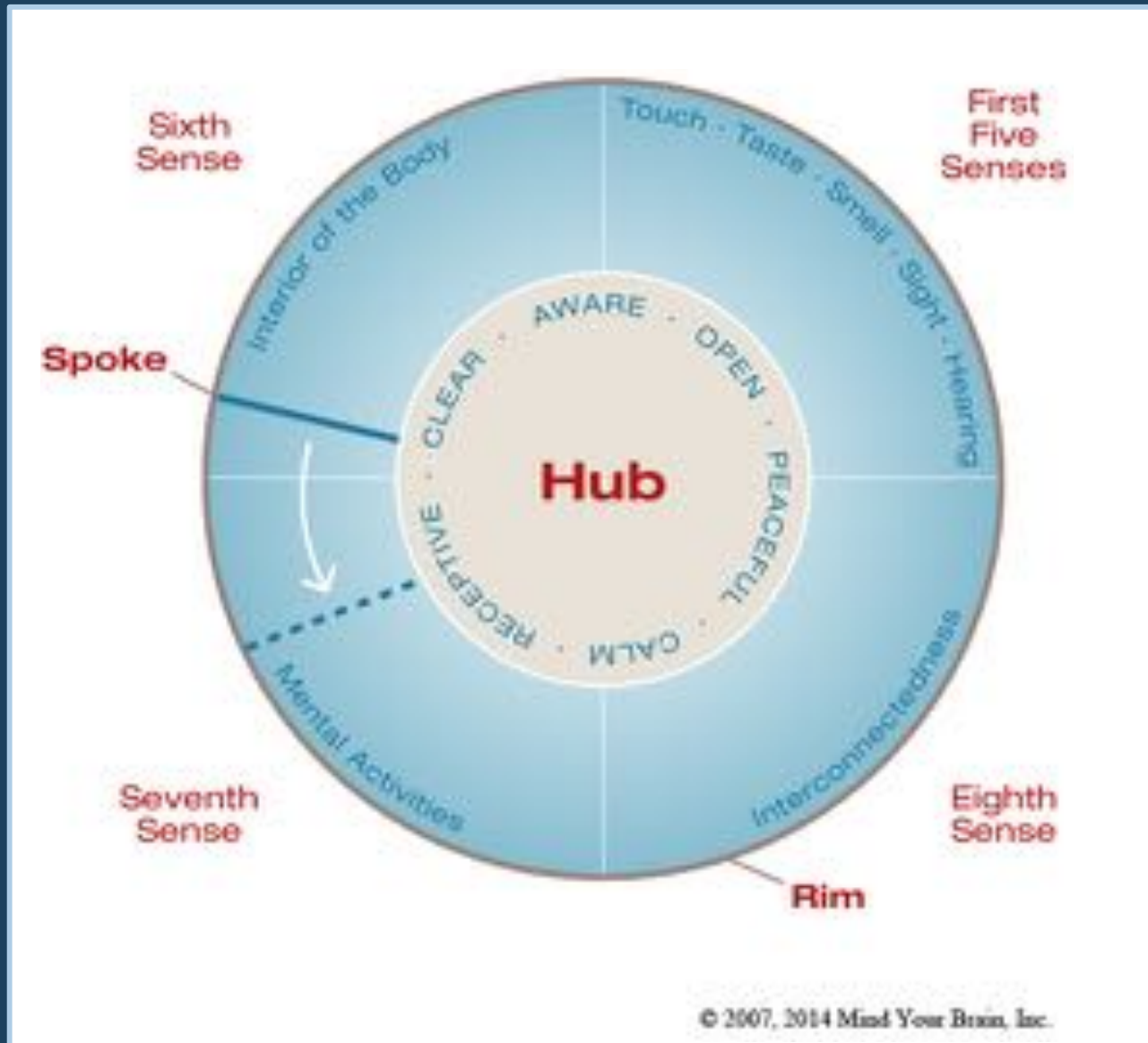


TOOLKIT

- Name It to Tame It
- Wheel of Awareness
- RAIN Approach
- Balancing the Mind
- Strengthen Your Internal Observer



WHEEL OF AWARENESS



THE RAIN APPROACH

- Recognize
- Accept/Acknowledge/Allow
- Investigate
- Non-Identification



IDENTIFYING TRAUMAS

List some emotional or physical traumas or traumatic events that have happened in your life. These do not have to be “Big T” traumas. A trauma can be any significant, distressing event or incident that shaped you as a child – things that made you feel bad, scared, ashamed, etc.

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

THINK ABOUT A RECENT TIME THAT YOU GOT TRIGGERED...

How did you feel at the time?

What event or feeling in your childhood do you think led you to feel triggered in the recent situation?

Write a story that makes sense out of why you felt triggered.



CHOOSE YOUR WORDS

Choose from the descriptive list given below and pick the word that best describes the deeper emotion that comes up when you get triggered emotionally. This is often some kind of fear about yourself or how others feel about you. It may be some kind of anguish or hurt.



Lonely

Dismissed and Unimportant

Frustrated and Helpless

On Guard and Uncomfortable

Scared

Hurt

Hopeless

Helpless

Intimidated

Threatened

Panicked

Rejected

Like I Don't Matter

Ignored

Inadequate

Shut Out and Alone

Confused and Lost

Embarrassed

Ashamed

Blank

Afraid

Shocked

Sad

Forlorn

Disappointed

Isolated

Let Down

Numb

Humiliated

Overwhelmed

Small or Insignificant

Unwanted

Vulnerable

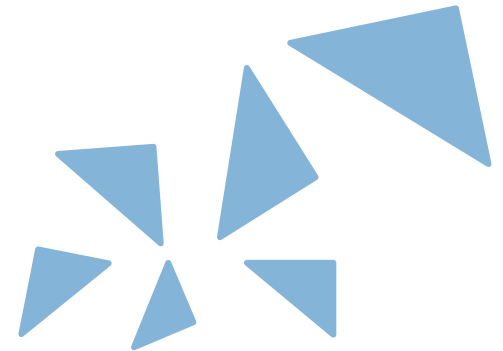
Worried

3. WORK ON YOUR PATTERN IN THERAPY



IMPLICATION OF ATTACHMENT THEORY FOR TREATMENT

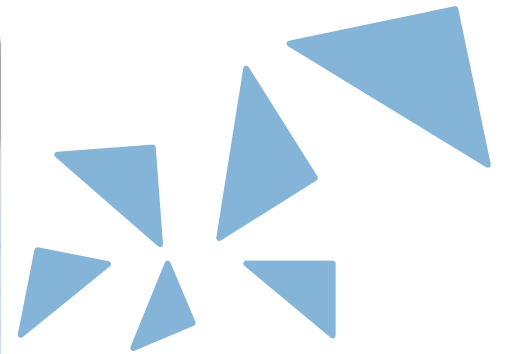
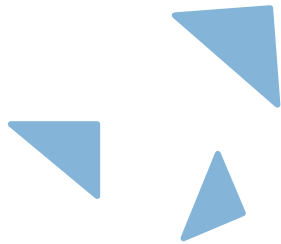
Psychotherapy promotes self-understanding by illuminating how clients' internal working models as opposed to external forces are what shape the present quality of their interpersonal relationships.



From "The Role of Adult Attachment Styles in Psychopathology and Psychotherapy Outcomes"
<http://cmapspublic2.ihmc.us/rid=1LQRRMMH0-FYYR87-1L42/pdf.pdf>

DEVELOP SECURITY IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

- Psychotherapy is an excellent vehicle to develop an earned secure attachment.
- Find a therapist that resonates with you and who is knowledgeable about attachment. Stay in therapy for two to five years.



Case Study

- Patient had a fearful-avoidant/anxious-avoidant attachment style with high attachment-related anxiety (e.g. fearing rejection) and high attachment-related avoidance (e.g. claiming not to care about close relationships).
- Her avoidant attachment style was largely related to the frightening mother who provided little comfort and pushed for inappropriate independence..
- She learned not to seek comfort, to avoid feeling and sharing emotions, and developed low self-esteem.
- By providing a safe, empathic holding environment, she was provided the opportunity for trust, intimacy, and freedom from the fear of abandonment.
- Through the security of a genuine relationship, we could challenge and process her mistrust, suppression of anger, denial of social needs, distorted perception of early life experiences, passivity, guilt and shame, and fear of rejection.
- Through the prism of the relationship, she developed coherence, collaboration, reflection, and mentalization. These characteristics gave way to trust, reflection, self-expression, self-compassion and self-protection as she explored the world, took risks and sought out intimacy with others.
- Patient had an early insecure attachment style that became secure through the therapeutic relationship, resulting in a corrective attachment experience and remission of her avoidant personality disorder.

ATTACHMENT THEORY-BASED INTERVENTIONS

- Most existing therapies use techniques and principles that are in line with attachment theory.
- For example, healthy therapeutic relationships, exploration of significant relationships in past.



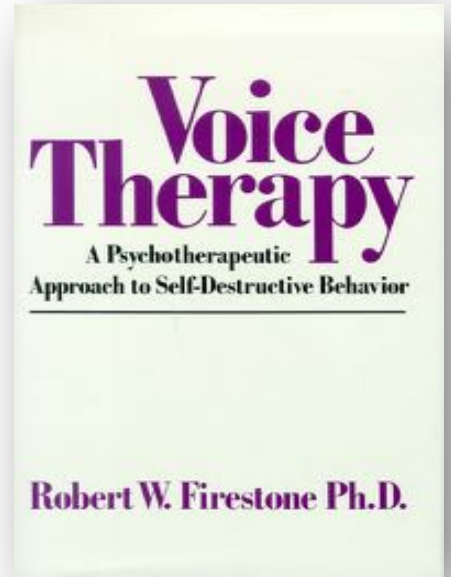
From "Attachment Theory and Research: Implications for Psychodynamic Psychotherapy"
http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-1-60761-792-1_24#page-1

IMPLICATION OF ATTACHMENT THEORY FOR TREATMENT

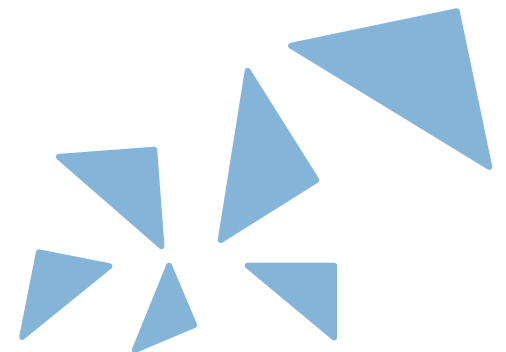
- ▶ **BEHAVIORAL AND FAMILY SYSTEMS THERAPIES** focus on making unconscious memories conscious and available for inspection.
- ▶ **COGNITIVE THERAPIES** focus on changing the stories we tell ourselves about the way families operate.
- ▶ **PSYCHODYNAMIC THERAPIES** focus on resolution of old memories and traumas.
- ▶ **MEDITATIVE THERAPIES** teach techniques to attain distance from distressing life events in order to make sense of them



Voice Therapy



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



SELF-COMPASSION

“Being touched by and not avoiding your suffering”

“

From Kristin Neff:

Self-compassion is not based on self-evaluation. It is not a way of judging ourselves positively; it is a way of relating to ourselves kindly.

Three Elements:

1. Self-kindness Vs. Self-judgment
2. Mindfulness Vs. Over-identification with thoughts
3. Common humanity Vs. Isolation



INTERPERSONAL NEUROBIOLOGY

C urious

O pen

A ccepting

Loving



Emotionally Focused Therapy

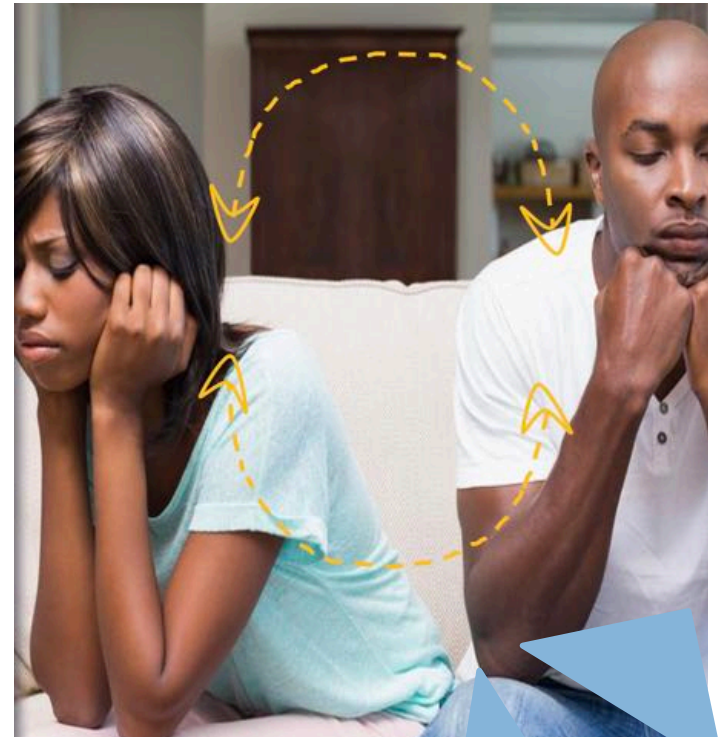
Les Greenberg Pursuer/ Distancer

Dismissive-Avoidant Attachment = **Distancer**



Perpetuating Cycles

- Both partners may engage in behaviors that push or provoke each other in ways that encourage each other to play the other half of old, familiar dynamics.
- Their relationships start to look more and more like those of their past
- Reinforces each partner's working model, confirming what they already believe about love and relationships
- Blame the cycle, not each other



4. DEVELOP EARNED SECURITY IN A RELATIONSHIP



DEVELOPING A SECURE ATTACHMENT

- ▷ Because our attachment ability is broken in a relationship, it can be fixed in a relationship. This can be with a romantic partner, a close friend or a good therapist. It takes time to develop an Earned Secure Attachment in a relationship. Stick with it!

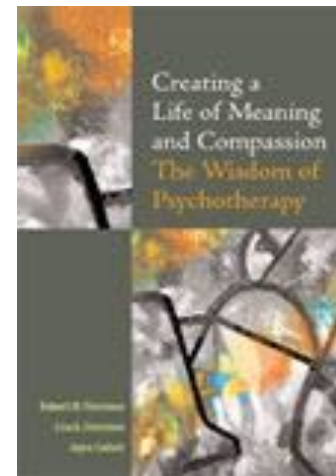
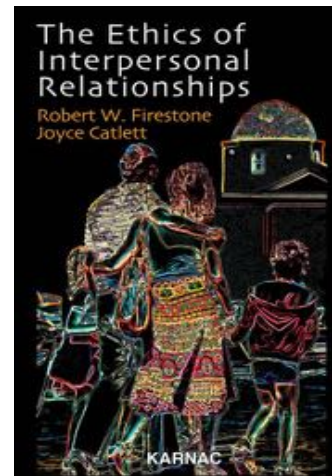
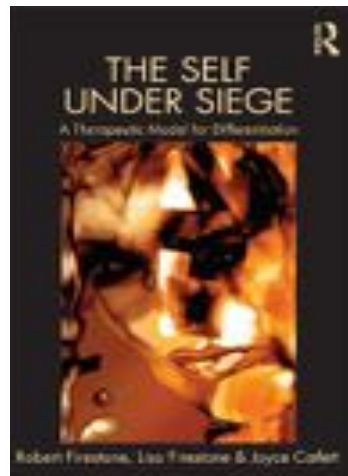
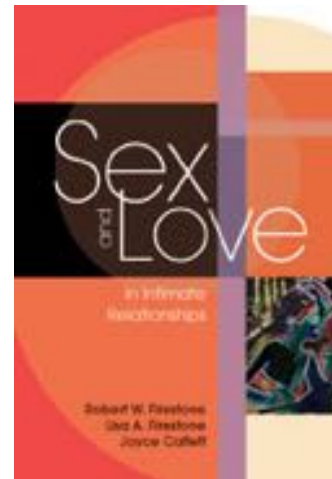
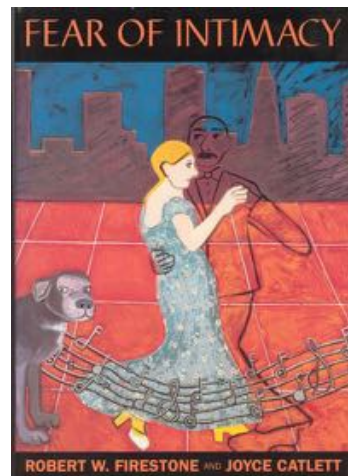


CHALLENGING AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT IN RELATIONSHIPS

- Tell your partner that you're struggling with expressing your emotions.
- Find ways to show your affection for your partner each day.
- Refuse to let yourself shut down when someone expresses their emotions.



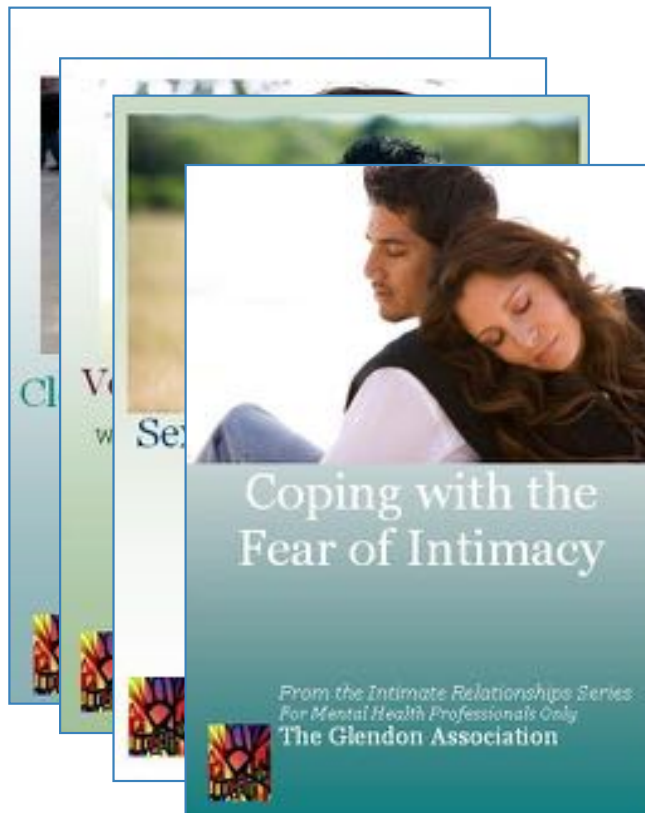
BOOKS



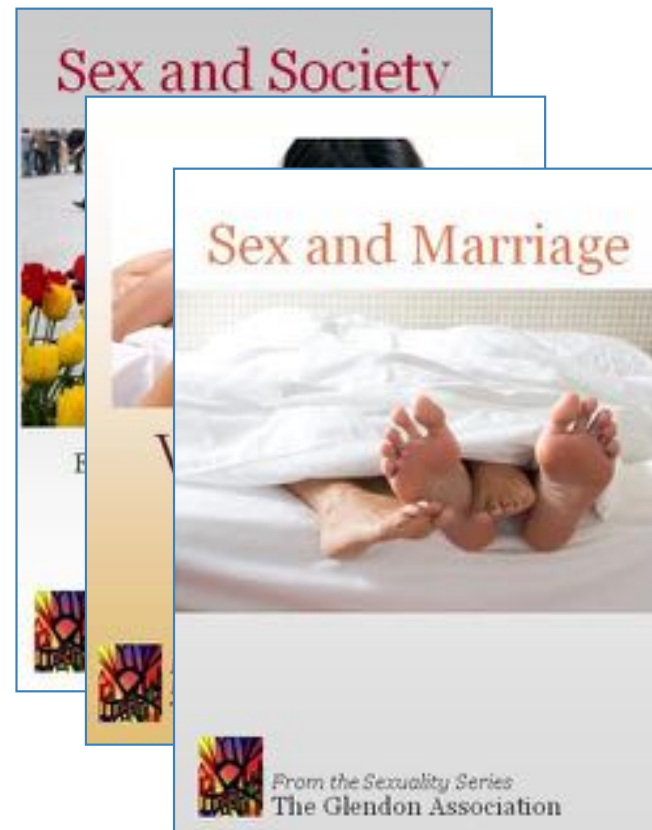
Visit WWW.PSYCHALIVE.ORG for resource links.

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THANK YOU SO MUCH!

Any questions?

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