

UNDERSTANDING FEARFUL- AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT

with Lisa Firestone, Ph.D.



WELCOME



LISA FIRESTONE, PH.D.

Director of Research and Education

The Glendon Association

Senior Editor

PsychAlive



WWW.GLENDON.ORG



WWW.PSYCHALIVE.ORG

THIS WEBINAR WILL EXPLORE:

- ▷ What is Fearful-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 more inner security, and achieve closer, more fulfilling relationships
- ▷ Tools to calm down in times of stress



ATTACHMENT THEORY?



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

SECURE vs DISORGANIZED ATTACHMENT

ATTACHMENT STYLE

- ▷ Secure
- ▷ Insecure – Disorganized



PARENTAL INTERACTIVE PATTERN

- ▷ Emotionally available, perceptive, responsive (Safe, seen, soothed)
- ▷ Frightening, frightened, disorienting, alarming
- ▷ Child doesn't view the parent as a secure base
- ▷ Fear without solution
- ▷ Go for comfort, afraid once they get close

DISORGANIZED VS FEARFUL-AVOIDANT

ORIGINS:

Developmental literature suggests adult disorganized attachment exists, because disorganization in infancy is predictive of behaviors in childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood.

CHARACTERIZED BY:

- Disassociation and disorientation
- Nonsensical elements to behaviors and stories
- Lack of coping and emotional regulation strategies
- Trouble managing stress
- Ambivalent and erratic feelings in close relationships
- Possible hostile/ aggressive behaviors
- Association with Borderline Personality Disorder

ORIGINS:

Classification of avoidant attachment:

- ✓ Dismissive = Positive model of self and negative model of others
- ✓ Fearful = Negative model of self and others

CHARACTERIZED BY:

- Negative self-image combined with a skepticism that significant others can be trusted to be loving and available
- Longing for intimacy, but fearful of rejection and being hurt; mistrustful
- Paranoia and suspicion

INSECURE DISORGANIZED ATTACHMENT

▷ Disorganized attachment can be passed from generation to generation.

▷ Mary Main(using the AAI) found that unresolved trauma and loss in a parent's life is the best predictor of disorganized attachment between a parent and child.



▷ Parents who experienced abuse, neglect or unresolved trauma in their early lives without feeling the full pain and making sense of their story are likely to:

- Engage in disorienting behavior with their child
- Be flooded by emotions in times of stress
- Have trouble tolerating a range of emotions in their child
- React to their kids with fear or other primal emotion
- Act out destructive behavior without being fully aware it

Implicit vs. Explicit Memory

Explicit Memory

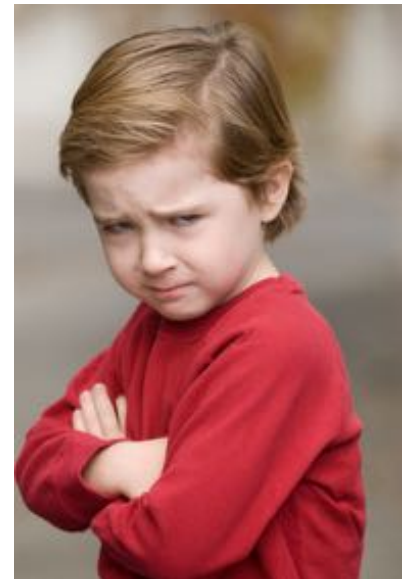
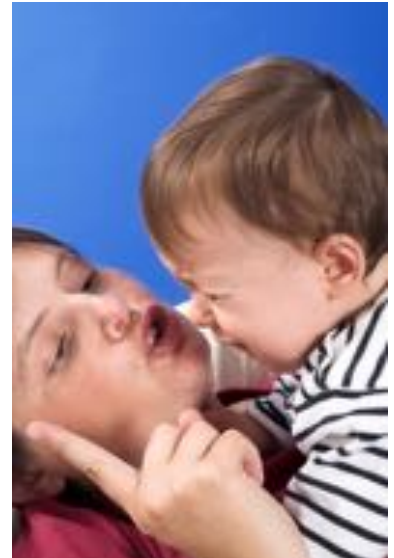


Implicit Memory



Implicit memory of terrifying experiences may create:

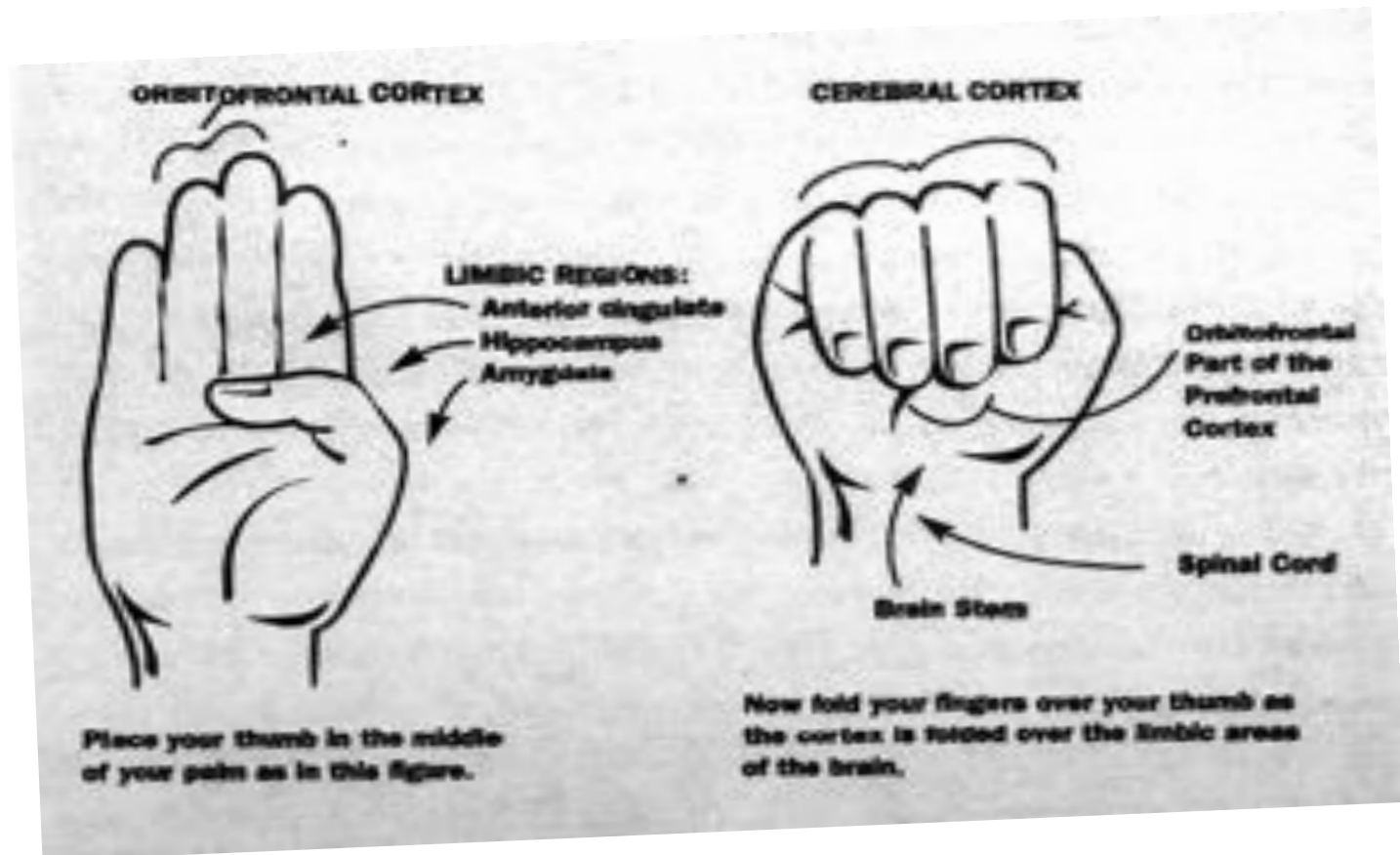
- Impulsive behaviors
- Distorted perceptions
- Rigid thoughts and impaired decision-making patterns
- Difficulty tolerating a range of emotions



THE BRAIN IN THE PALM OF YOUR HAND



Daniel Siegel, M.D. – Interpersonal Neurobiology



VIDEOS

*Dr. Allan Schore on
Attachment Trauma*

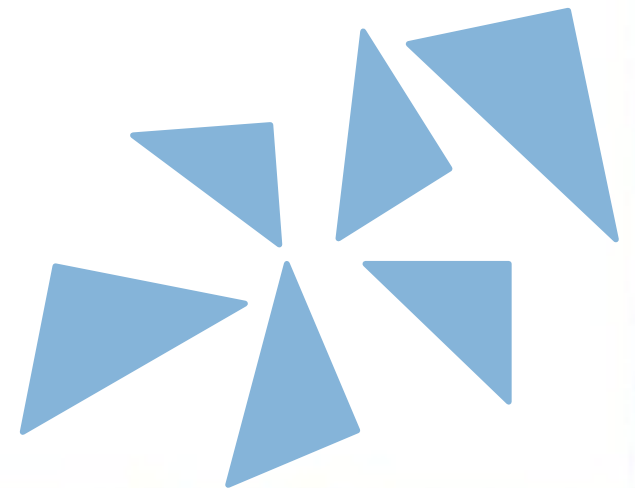
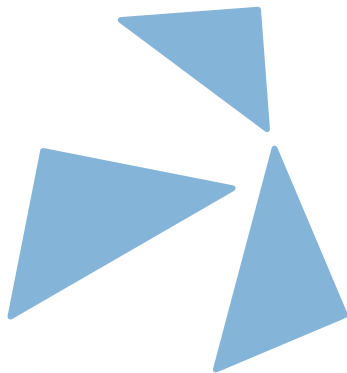
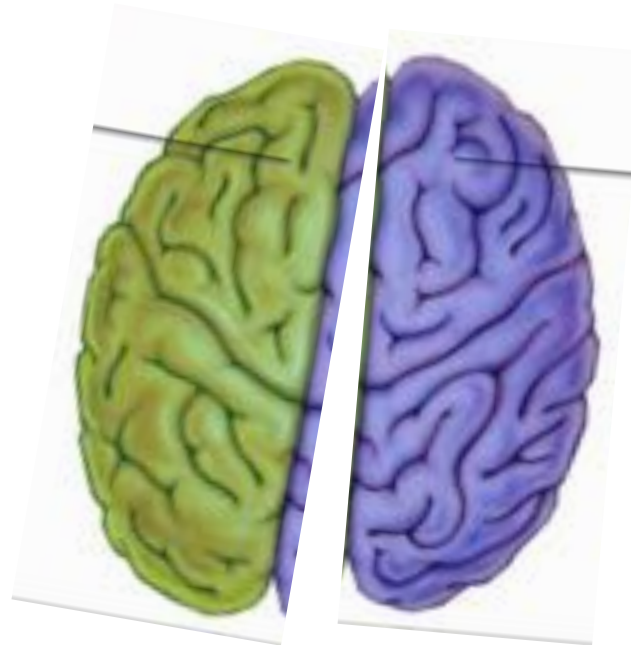


*Example of Disorganized
Attachment*



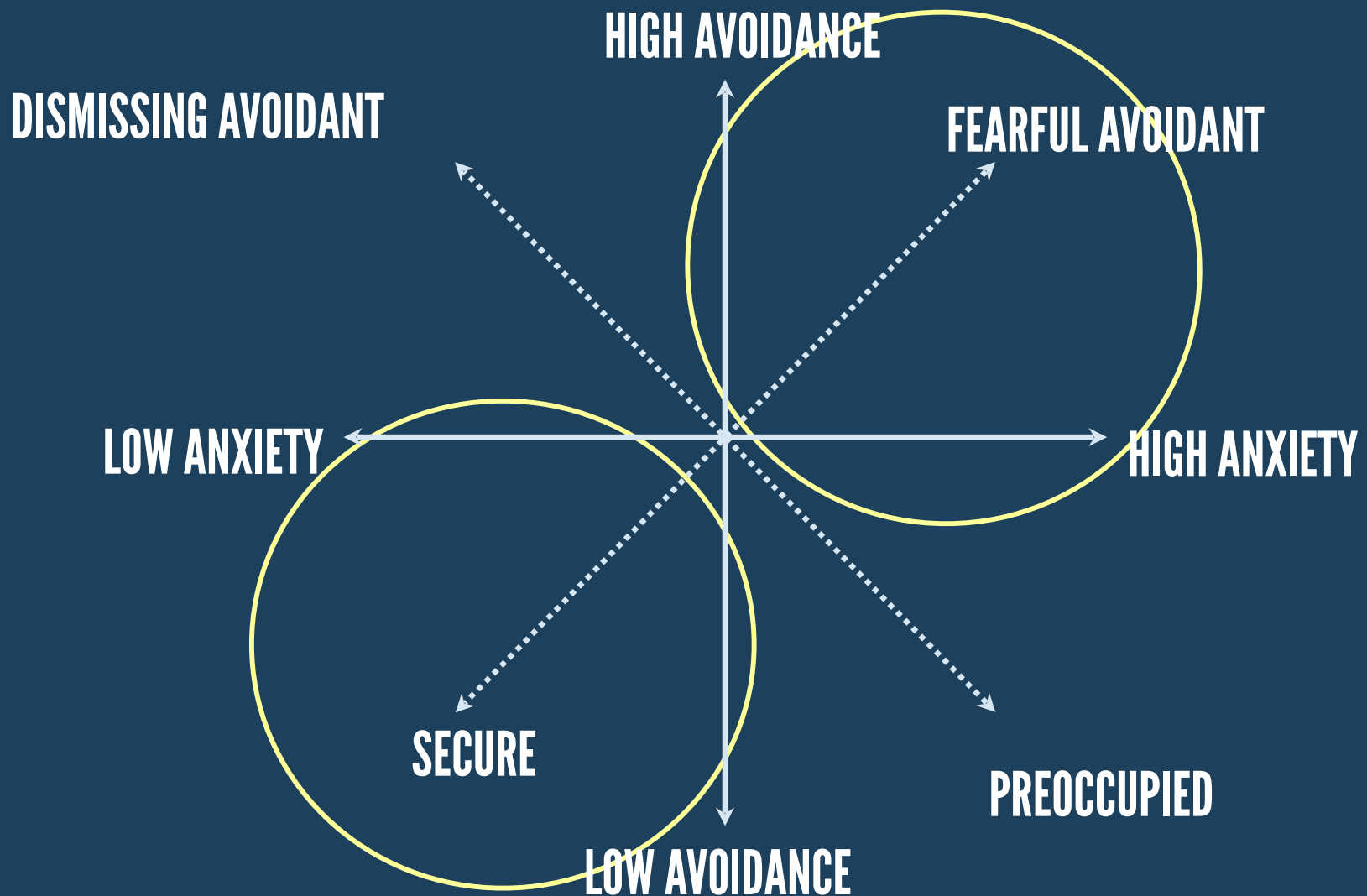
Disorganized Attachment

- Lack of integration between both sides of the brain
- This leads to a blockage across many brain systems (i.e. sense of time, which is “mediated by the prefrontal cortex that works with both right and left, gets lost and the past merges with the present”
- Narratives tend to be disoriented or disorganized, particularly when focusing on loss or trauma



ADULT ATTACHMENT STYLES:

REGIONS IN A 2-DIMENSIONAL SPACE



Disorganized Attachment in Adulthood

- Childhood trauma is shown to result in externalizing adult outcomes toward partners.
- The mechanism relies, in part, on adult disorganized attachment.
- Controlling for current abuse does not eliminate all effects of disorganization.
- **Disorganization is different from fearful avoidance in predicting externalization.**



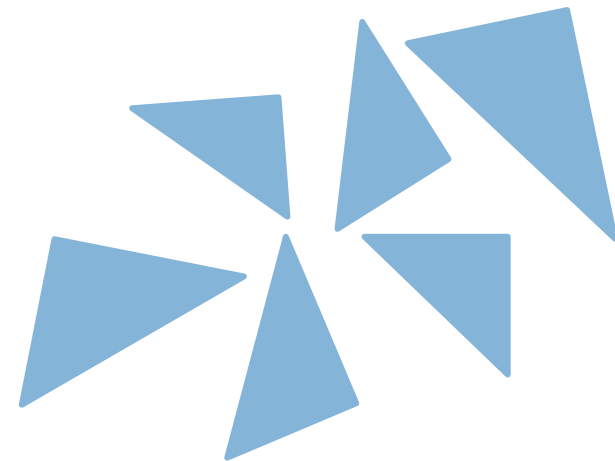
Disorganized Attachment in Adulthood

- *Unlike avoidance and anxiety, the central characteristic of disorganization in adulthood is a fear of romantic attachment figures in general... As the “fear without solution,” it is the only fear that encourages simultaneous and confused approach and avoidance of the attachment figure for support and solace in times of need.*
- *Fear of attachment figures encourages contradictory and confused behavior. They seek to approach the partner in times of distress, but these approaches may be interrupted or incomplete, appearing to be chaotic or incoherent, because their fear of the partner may simultaneously cause apprehension and a desire to distance themselves.*



Disorganized Attachment and BPD

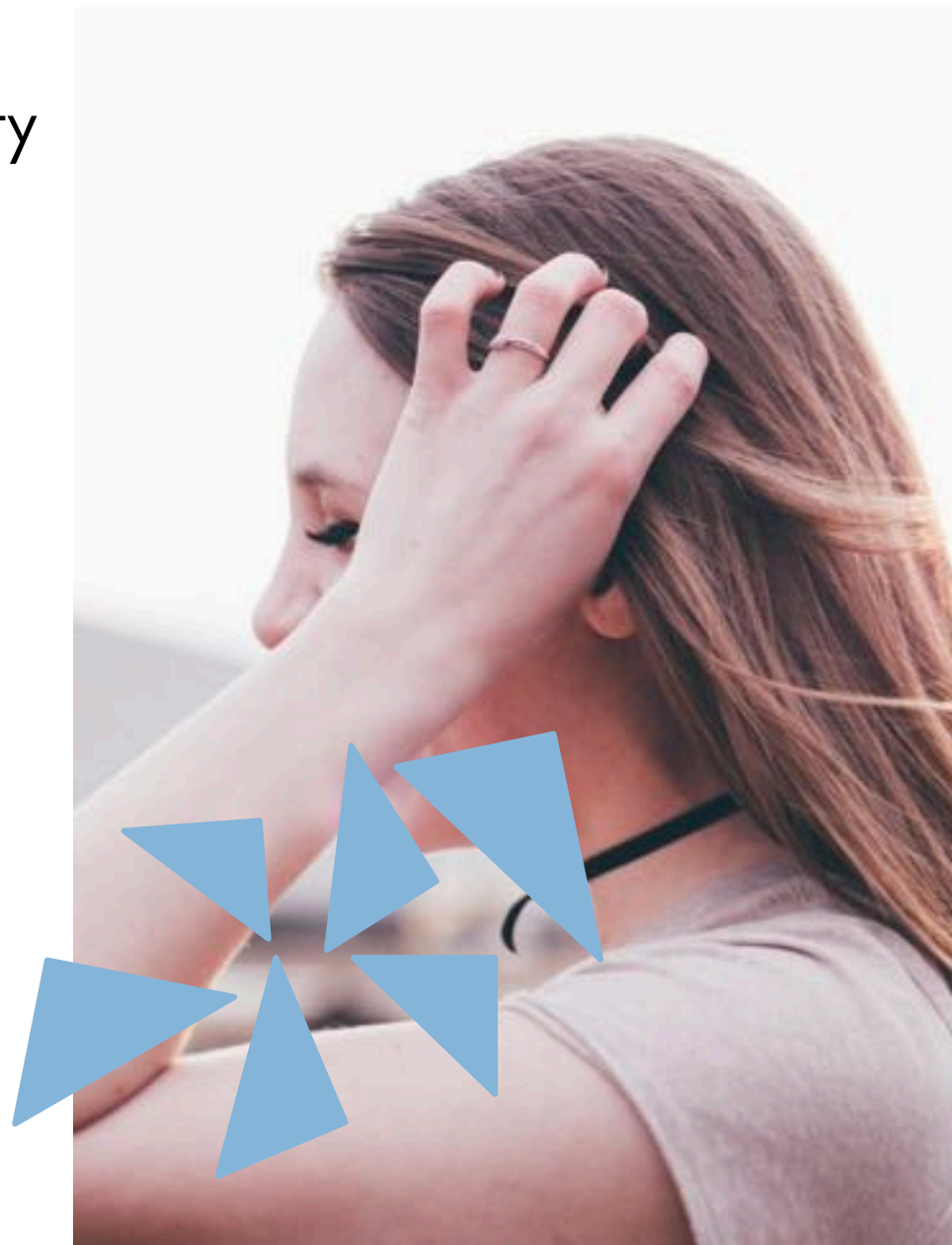
- Attachment anxiety and avoidance interact, suggesting a particularly strong relationship between attachment disorganization and Borderline Personality Disorder traits.
- Being disorganized not just with one but with both parents is particularly characteristic of adolescents with BPD.



Fearful-Avoidant Attachment

- Characterized by both high anxiety and high avoidance. Wants immediate assistance
- Both high avoidant and anxious attachment tendencies (reluctant to engage in a close relationship and a dire need to be loved by others)
- Engages in both deactivating and hyperactivating strategies

Sources: <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2019-66179-001>
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0092623X.2019.1566946>
<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2013-01876-009>



Fearful-Avoidant

"I want to be close, but what if I get hurt?"



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

Fearful Avoidance and Sexuality

- More sexual partners in individuals during their lifetime
- Greater sexual compliance.



Source: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0092623X.2019.1566946>

VIDEO

Disorganized 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 Fearful-Avoidant

They don't really like you.

You're being suffocated.

They're going to reject you.

You can't trust them.

This is too much for you.

You're unloveable.

They're lying to you!

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 inner security
 - If you're not with someone secure, go to couples' therapy

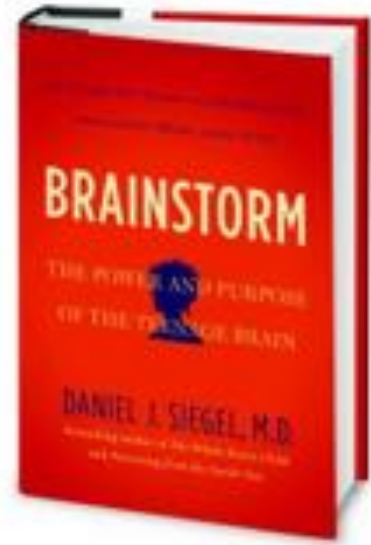
From: "https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_stop_attachment_insecurity_from_ruining_your_love_life"

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 :

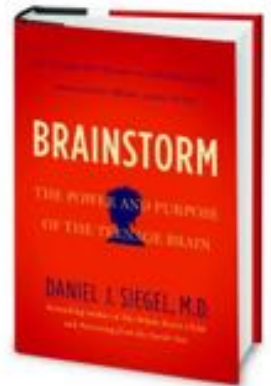
ADJECTIVE 4:

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



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



FORMING A STORY:

The Benefits of Narrative

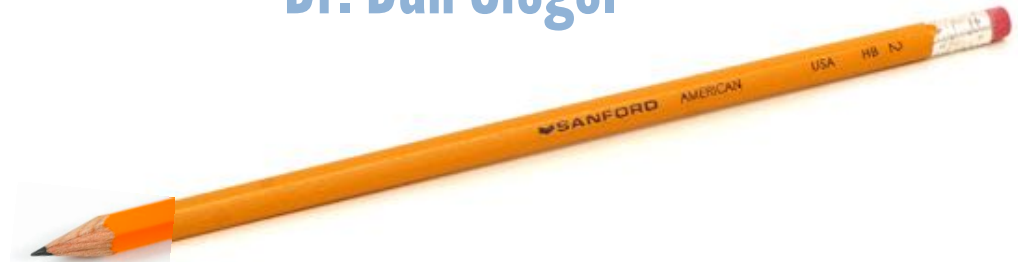
~ James Pennebaker & Janel Seagal, Journal of Clinical Psychology, 1999

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

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

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



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

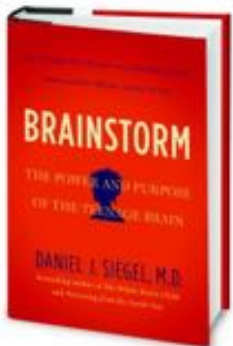
Mindfulness helps integrate the brain for all attachment patterns.



PRACTICE INTEGRATING YOUR BRAIN

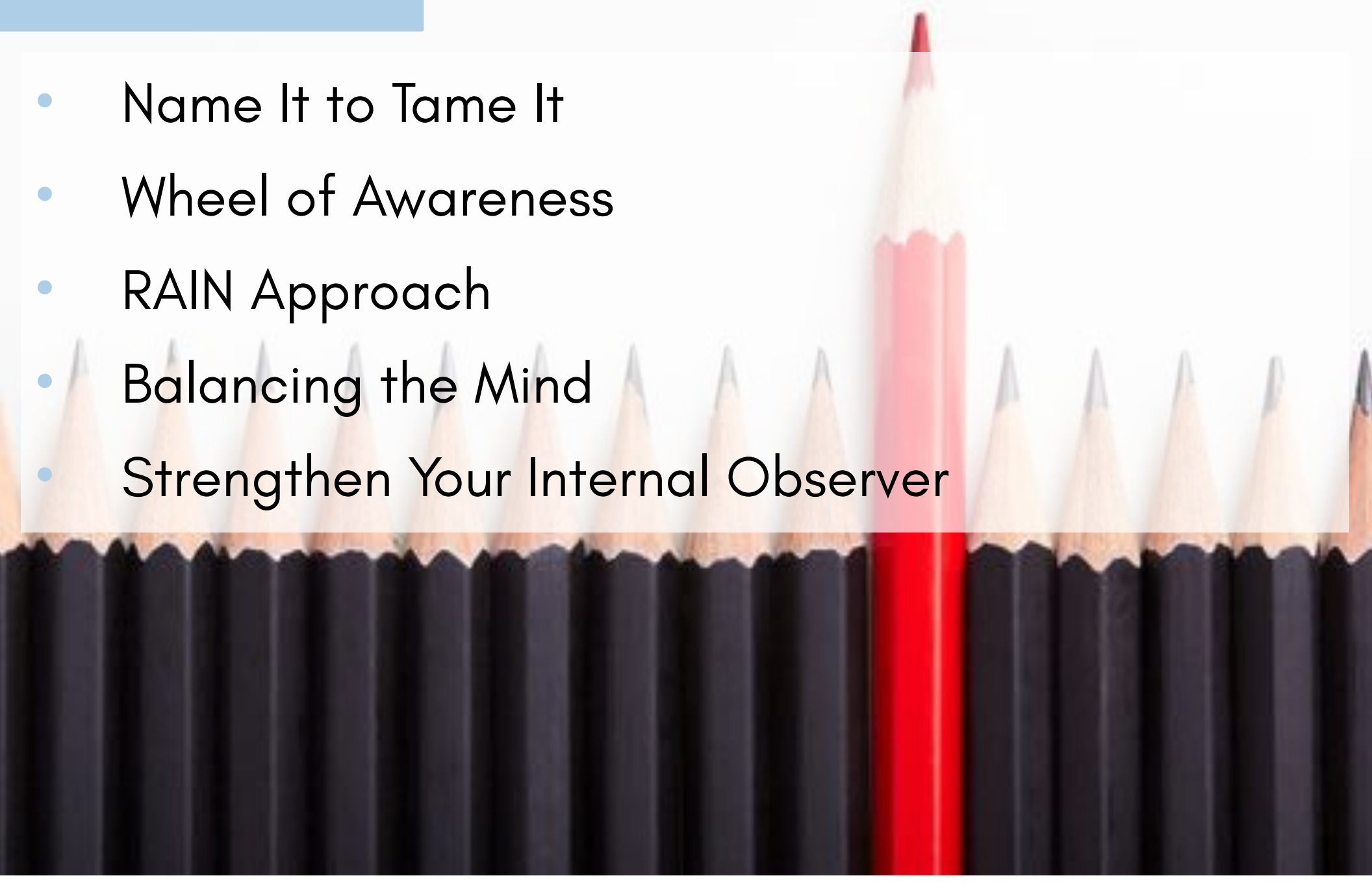
DISORGANIZED ATTACHMENT:

- Keep a journal and be sure to write about times when you feel triggered or your internal world may feel fragmented.
- When investigating your past, try to use the **RAIN approach** – *recognize* the trauma or loss, *accept* that it has occurred and may be in a state of being unresolved, *investigate* the nature of the experience in our past and present lives, and have *non-identification* with the experiences (meaning the events don't define you).
- **SIFT** – Pay attention to your *sensations, feelings, thoughts* and *images*, as they arise.

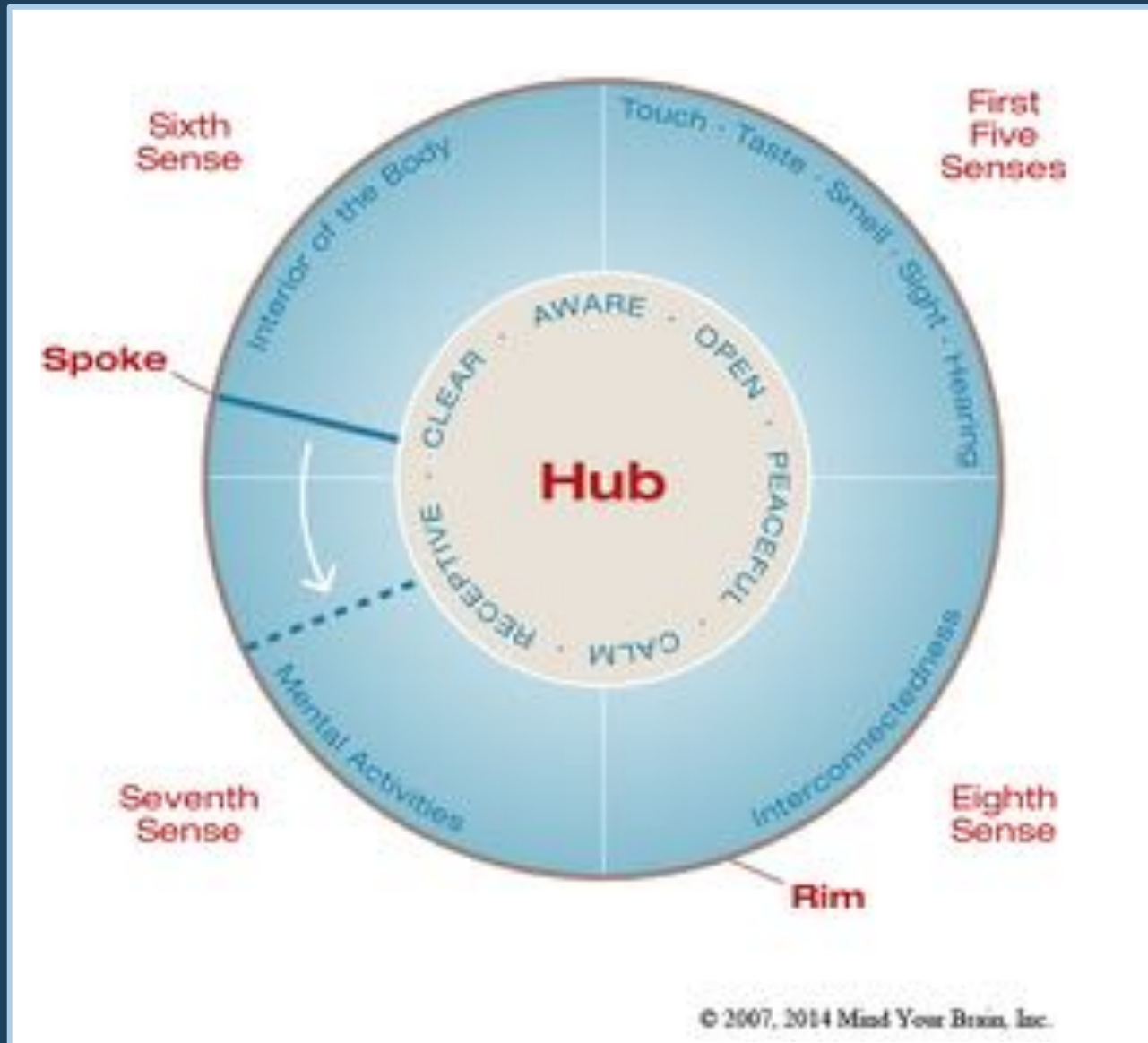


TOOLKIT

- 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

Disclosure of Traumas and Immune Function: Health Implications for Psychotherapy

“...writing about traumatic experience has positive effects...”

~ James Pennebaker, Janice Kiecolt-Glaser, & Ronald Glaser, *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 1988

Another step closer to measuring the ghosts in the nursery: preliminary validation of the Trauma Reflective Functioning Scale

“...the importance of mentalization specifically about trauma...it is not the experience of trauma *per se*, but the absence of mentalization regarding trauma that is associated with difficulties in close relationships...”

~ Karen Ensink, Nicolas Berthelot, Odette Bernazzani, Lina Normandin, & Peter Fonagy, *Frontiers*, 2014

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



DEVELOP SECURITY IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

- Psychotherapy that helps resolve unresolved trauma
- Trauma-informed therapies
- Therapies that focus on skill-building for emotional regulation and emotional tolerance
- Therapist willing to challenge paranoid/ suspicious thinking

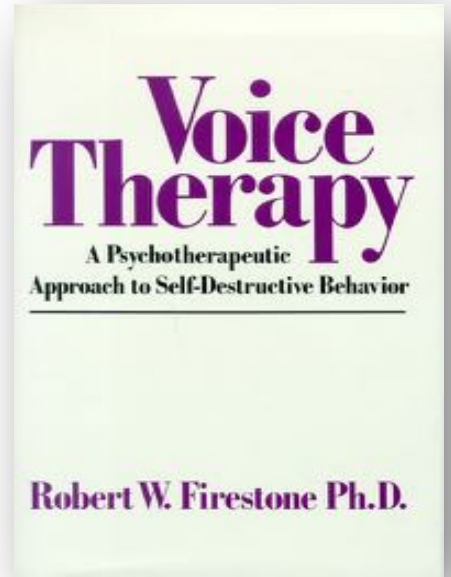


IMPLICATION OF ATTACHMENT THEORY FOR TREATMENT

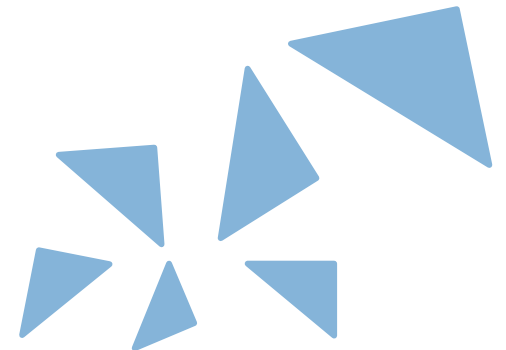
- ▷ **DIALECTICAL BEHAVIORAL THERAPY** – Marsha Linehan
- ▷ **MENTALIZING** – Peter Fonagy
- ▷ **BODY-BASED TRAUMA HEALING** – Peter Levine, Bessel van der Kolk
- ▷ **SENSORIMOTOR PSYCHOTHERAPY** – Pat Ogden
- ▷ **EMDR** – Francine Shapiro



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



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THANK YOU SO MUCH!

Any questions?

Lisa Firestone, Ph.D.

lfirestone@glendon.org



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