

As we dig deeper into understanding our relationships and their impact on us it's probably helpful to look at a few core ideas from the area of attachment theory. From an attachment perspective, the quality of our biological and primary relationships leads to a felt sense of security that contributes to our brain development, our self-esteem, and overall physical health, as we get older. The field of interpersonal neurobiology, led by Dr. Dan Siegel, convincingly demonstrates that our neurological wiring and brain development from infancy through adulthood is a direct product of our interactions with others beginning in infancy.

Attachment theory proposes that if we have "good enough" parents, we will develop a relatively secure sense of attachment. The developer of Attachment Theory, John Bowlby, frequently refers to the ideas of our developmental homes needing to be a secure base and a safe haven.

A secure base is a place where we know we can always return and find sanctuary. A safe haven comes from the idea that our parents unconditionally love and accept us no matter what kinds of mistakes we make along the way. With these two ideas in place, we can then begin to venture out into the world to explore our pursuits knowing that we always exist in the minds of our parents and can always return to be soothed and comforted when the world deals us inevitable blows.

A secure base and safe haven stem from having our basic needs met in a timely way from infancy through childhood. These obviously include food, clothing, shelter, and love. Our parents demonstrate love to us by trying to understand who we are and what we are experiencing and reflecting these feelings back to us. This process is called attunement. It is the act of intentionally trying to understand and appreciate the internal mental and emotional state of those around us.

If you think about it, attunement is at the heart of good therapy. It is likely more powerful than any skills or training a therapist may have. Having someone focused on us and our internal mental and emotional state affirms our importance as human

beings and normalizes our experiences while letting us connect with someone at a deeper level. It is hard to underestimate the power of this dynamic.

In healthy attachment environments, this attunement leads our parents to have contingent communication with us. Contingency means that they communicate in ways that reflect empathy when we are hurting, excitement when we are happy, and a response that is based on noticing how we are doing in that moment. Contingency is expressed primarily through verbal affirmations as well as non-verbal cues like tone of voice, volume, facial expression, and undivided focus on us in the present moment. It's the total opposite of "If you want something to cry about, I'll give you something to cry about."

If we have these kinds of attachments from early childhood, we naturally believe the world is a safe enough place. We also tend to believe that others are essentially good and for us. Unfortunately, research seems to demonstrate that secure attachments are more the exception than the rule.