

Developing a Secure Attachment

It is never too late to develop an Earned Secure Attachment. Models of attachment are changeable, but only if we come to understand them. We can do this by:

- Feeling the full pain of your childhood and making sense of it
- Developing integrated brain functioning and emotional maturation (overcoming maladaptive defense mechanisms and relationship patterns)
- Learning strategies to create secure attachments in adulthood
- Discovering and re-defining personal identity

Since 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. Remember, it takes time to develop an Earned Secure Attachment. Stick with it!

Research shows that through the process of self-reflection and gaining 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.

Why is it important to make sense of your life? "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

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.

Self-compassion is "Being touched by and not avoiding your suffering" There are three elements to self-compassion:

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

Writing a Coherent Narrative

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.
- 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 was it like growing up in your family?
- What was your parents' philosophy about raising children?

Family Conflicts

- What were the major conflicts in your family?
- Did you have conflict with anyone?
- Can you remember what would happen when you were hurt, emotionally and physically?
- 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 did your parents respond?
- Did you experience the loss of a parent or other close loved one while you were a young child - for example, a sibling, a close family member, or friend? How did this affect you as a child? How does it affect you as an adult?
- How were you disciplined as a child?
- Have you ever felt threatened by your parents?
- Have you ever felt rejected by your parents?

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. Repeat with your father or father figure.

Relationship with Parental Figures and Attachment Bond

- Write down 5 Adjectives about your relationship with your mother, and the associated memories
- Write down 5 Adjectives about your relationship with your father, and the associated memories
- To which parent did you feel the closest, and why? Why isn't there this feeling with the other parent?

Personality Development

- Why do you think your parents behaved as they did during your childhood?
- Were there many changes in your relationship with your parents (or remaining parent) after childhood?
- What is your relationship with your parents (or remaining parent) like for you now as an adult?
- In general, how do you think your overall experiences with your parents have affected your adult personality?
- Are there any other aspects of your early experiences that you think might have held your development back, or had a negative effect on the way you turned out?
- Is there anything you feel you have learned or gained from your own childhood experiences?
- What do you hope your child (or, your imagined child) will learn from his/her experiences of being parented by you?

Overcoming Negative Thoughts Exercise

- Write down the negative thoughts you have about yourself on the first half of the page. As you write your thoughts, use the second person or “you” statements. After you have written your negative thoughts down, come back to each of the thoughts and try to answer them positively. Practice self-compassion in your answers, as you respond to your self-attacks rationally and realistically.

Negative Thoughts (example)

1. “You’re so stupid.”

Compassionate Response (example)

1. “Sometimes I struggle with work, but I catch on quickly and do a good job.”

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 or as an adult – things that made you feel bad, scared, ashamed, etc., especially in regards to your personal relationships.

Identifying Triggers

Think about a recent time that you got triggered and write a story that makes sense out of why you felt triggered. 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	Overwhelmed	Hurt	Intimidated
Rejected	Sad	Lost	Confused
Disappointed	Vulnerable	Worried	Shaky
Unimportant	Scared	Hopeless	Panicked
Inadequate	Failing	Ashamed	Humiliated
Small	Insignificant	Unwanted	Dismissed
Helpless	Unloved	Devalued	Desperate

Recent Trigger

- What happened that triggered me?
- How did I feel at the time?
- What event from my childhood may have contributed to feeling triggered?

Addressing Attachment Styles

Anxious/Ambivalent Attachment

- Cultivate the ability to name your internal emotional states (“name it to tame it”). Simply describe what you feel, you don’t need to explain it.
- Write in a journal. Use your left hemisphere’s drive to tell a logical, linear, language-based story.
- Pay attention to when your attachments system goes into overdrive. Focus on keeping an internal state of calm at these times.

Avoidant Attachment

- Become aware of non-verbal signals by 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.

Disorganized Attachment

- Keep a journal and be sure to write about times when you feel triggered or when your internal world feels fragmented.
- When investigating your past, 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, Images, Feelings, and Thoughts, as they arise.
- Psychotherapy is an excellent vehicle to develop an earned secure attachment. Find a therapist that resonates with you. Stay in therapy for two to five years.

Self Differentiation

“To lead a free life, a person must separate him/herself from negative imprinting and remain open and vulnerable... As children, people not only identify with the defenses of their parents but also tend to incorporate into themselves the critical or hostile attitudes that were directed toward them. These destructive personal attacks become part of the child's developing personality, forming an alien system, the *anti-self*, distinguishable from the self system, which interferes with and opposes the ongoing manifestation of the true personality of the individual.” ~ Robert Firestone, Ph.D.

Becoming Self-Differentiated

Step 1: Break with internalized negative thought processes, i.e., critical, hostile attitudes toward self and others.

Step 2: Separate from negative personality traits assimilated from one's parents.

Step 3: Relinquish patterns of defense (cognitive defense mechanisms) formed as an adaptation to painful events in one's childhood.

Step 4: Develop one's own values, ideals, and beliefs, rather than automatically accepting those one has grown up with.

Self-Differentiation Exercises

In your journal, quickly list the ways you re-enact a parent's negative behavior or traits in your life today. What negative behaviors or undesirable traits of your parent/parents are you re-enacting in your own life? How are you re-enacting your parent's negative behaviors and traits in your current relationship(s) with your partner, and with your own children?

Write a letter saying goodbye to one of your parents. The purpose of the letter is to say goodbye to them as your parent, not as a person. You might express the following: "I don't need you anymore as a mother/father. I'm an adult now and I am a separate person from you". You might describe elements of your relationship, how you felt as a child, and how you will no longer engage in certain dynamics. You will not send this letter.

Write a letter saying goodbye to your childhood self. Imagine looking at yourself as a child. What would you like to convey to that child? Describe yourself in a balanced way; as you write about yourself as a child, use both compassion and objectivity. The purpose of the letter is to let go of any identification you still have with being that child. Even though your childhood shaped you in many ways, that is not who you are anymore. The goal is to live life fully in your adult self and in the present moment.

Personal Identity

Define yourself by answering the following questions:

- Who am I?
- What do I like about myself?
- What do I value in life?
- What do I believe in?
- What am I willing to take a stand for?
- What is my purpose?

Now use those answers to create a personal mantra/affirmation of Self Identity, for example:

"I am _____ and I am _____. I am here to _____."

I am _____ and I will _____. So be it."