

I Need You: A Story of Attachment

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A grandfather had taken his two year old grandson to the beach for the first time. And as he took him to the water's edge, he held out his index finger for toddler to grab hold of. The little boy reached up and held onto the very tip of his finger as they walked slowly a few steps into the moving water.

The grandfather could see the anxiety and excitement building in the child and noticed the boy consistently looking back and forth between the water and himself; checking to make sure everything was ok. The little boy was using his grandfather to know that everything was going to be ok as they stepped further and further into the water.

As the water approached chest high level for the child, he continued to hold onto the very tip of his grandfather's finger. It was imperative for him to maintain a connection and the grandfather could see his grandson using him to regulate the anxiety caused by the oncoming waves of water. The child would grip the fingertip tighter as a wave would come and splash against his body and then ease on the grip as the wave passed. This pattern repeated over and over again until the child gained confidence that he could handle the oncoming waves by himself, without the aid of Grandpa's finger. However, once a larger wave approached, the child reached back up and grasped for the finger again. It was there for the child to hold because Grandpa never took it away. It was always there for him to use when he needed and the child knew it.

This is a story of Attachment. The child reaching for the Grandfather's finger is not a learned behavior; it's an instinctual action, hardwired in our brains by evolution, never to grow out of. When we are faced with fear, we reach to others. And the waves in the story are a perfect metaphor for the waves of life that keep rolling toward us everyday.

It's a general consensus that in this country that from a very early age we need to be strong, self-sufficient, and able to handle things on our own and

not need to turn to others. Turning to others is viewed as weak, a sign of immaturity and co-dependent.

It's at this point that the question of "Which comes first?" enters the picture. Is it because we are self-sufficient and able to handle life on our own that makes it easier to reach and bring others closer to us? Or, is it because we are able to bring others close to us at times of need that makes us better able to deal with difficult times on our own? It is true that we need to be able to self-soothe when no one is available to share our anxieties and we need to be able to reach to others when life's waves come rolling toward us. Mental health is a balance. We need to be able to do both; to reach when we are scared and know someone will respond to us and be able to make it through the tough times when we are forced to be alone. This dual process is constantly at work within us all. And, moving to either one extreme or the other gives us the labels of "too clingy or disconnected". Neither is healthy for us or for our relationships.

Evolution has hardwired in us the need to reach to others when stressful times approach. Relearning or reinforcing this process is the number one key to achieving and maintaining positive mental health and positive successful relationships.

This concept of Attachment is a focus in the work I do when working with couples in therapy. Teaching and reinforcing a couple's ability to reach to each other for support and nurturing in times of need creates a strong emotional bond of connection, trust and safety. I will be discussing in future writings the importance of Attachment. I will be presenting examples of positive, successful attachment and examples of difficult, trying times when attachment was not utilized. I hope you find this example of the little boy and his grandfather helpful in conceptualizing the power of relationships in dealing with the waves of life that keep rolling at us.

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