

It All Starts With Development During Attachment

There are two basic areas in our brain that combine to make us "human"; the limbic system, which manages our instinctual functions like our emotions, and the neocortex, which is the source of our higher-level thinking and also where we store memories. The limbic system is pretty much operational from birth, supplying us with key skills needed to survive and giving us our emotions. The neocortex, however, is mostly a blank slate when we are born, populated with billions of neurons but with little "coordination" between them.

During our first three years of life - coincidentally the same period we are "attached" - those neurons create connections in the form of synapses as we learn from our surroundings, principally from our primary caregivers, usually our parents. We essentially use our built-in emotions to wire our cognitive abilities to make sense of the world around us. These "definitions of our environment" are the basis of our perception of the present as, later on, we'll continually use this as a "reference system" as our knowledge builds and expands. If all goes well we'll lay solid groundwork for making memories (Self-Esteem) and assessments (Self-Confidence) the two basic operations our neocortex performs. In other words, we learn how to look at the past and plan for the future, the basis for everything we say and do, and also what we don't say and don't do.

As adults, the neocortex is supposed to be the manager and controller of the input we receive from the limbic system/emotional center. If, during the attachment process and our adolescence, we don't obtain the full set of regulation skills needed, as adults we'll be left with triggers. Basically, when our lower brain functions perceive that something is amiss, we'll respond in a way - say or do something - that is inappropriate for a given situation. Our neocortex, unwittingly left to explain a gut feeling which it doesn't understand, will usually engage in a cognitive distortion. In other words, we will invent a cause or connection that doesn't really make sense.

The base part of our brain is a driven, selfish machine. It wants to protect us. So when it assesses a concern, it's going to propel us into determined action. And if the neocortex isn't filtering what is bubbling up, the behavior can be downright primitive. This is a key situation to note. If someone is triggered, they may not be aware of what they are doing or saying. In that case the best thing to do is not respond and leave it for another time. If need be, you may need to leave their presence. With more severe triggers a person's logical neocortex mind may not be contributing enough, so anything you say or do can escalate the situation. No matter how fair and calm your words may be, it may be a no-win situation.

To see how this all plays out in adulthood you'll want to look at the 4Sight Model white paper. Included below is a "Matrix of Learning" graphic to give you a high-level overview of how children acquire the basis for their emotional intelligence. We all need to be able to answer four-questions self-sufficiently...

Do I like myself?
Do I value myself?
Do I have discretion?
Do I have perseverance?

If any of those questions come into play - the first two during self-esteem "perception of the past" and the latter two during self-confidence "assessment of the future" - and are not adequately fulfilled, we become vulnerable to allowing our emotions to skew our view of reality. When that happens and is unchecked with our higher-level reasoning, we will reach an emotional or "irrational" conclusion which will result in an action or statement (or inaction or silence) that is undesirable. It won't make sense and we'll use cognitive distortions to try and fool ourselves when the logic is actually absent.

4Sight Matrix of Learning How Self-Esteem (SE) and Self-Confidence (SC) are established

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BLUE: what anyone - toddler to adult - needs to feel to develop SE or SC
GREEN: for a given branch, an appropriate response to enable development.
RED: a response that will prohibit growth if not reverse it.

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It is important to note that (age appropriate) activity is needed to build SE/SC, so, for example, a child that is coddled or protected while the parent may feel they are helping, prohibits the growth off SE/SC and may even limit or reduce it.

