THE NEUROSCIENCE OF RELATIONAL HEALING: THE ROLE OF CORRECTIVE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES IN THE COUNSELLOR-CLIENT ATTACHMENT

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New developments in the research of emotion
The science of emotion

- Treatment developers have long neglected the topic of emotion, particularly since the rise to prominence of behaviourism and cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) from the 1940s-1980s.

- Although emotion is depicted in the CBT model, most approaches emphasize interventions aimed at behaviour or cognition.

Focus shifting from cognitive, behaviour to emotion research

• beginning in the late 1980s and continuing through the 1990s and 2000s, a renewed interest in emotion science swept the field of psychology.

• advances in neuroscience.

• As the field began to better understand emotional circuitry in the brain, emotion became “observable” in a sense and thus was viewed as a legitimate focus for science.

Emotional Regulation happens in Relationships

• The vital need for secure attachments to process emotions

• The Neuroscience behind Emotional Regulation
"Neuroscience has discovered that our brain’s very design makes it sociable, inexorably drawn into an intimate brain-to-brain linkup whenever we engage with another person. That neural bridge lets us affect the brain and the body of everyone we interact with, just as they do us" (p. 4).
Limbic Resonance

Because of Limbic Resonance, the physical body changes in response to one’s own emotions and in response to emotions of other people. Changes in respiration, heart rate, blood pressure, body temperature and hormones consistent with other peoples’ emotional states occur when interacting with other humans, particularly when looking into their eyes (Lewis, Amini, & Lannon, 2001).
limbic resonance & self-regulation

• When we are in the presence of another our bodies synchronise with the other’s emotions – our heart rates, respiration and blood pressure changes to mirror that emotion.

• This is the basis of self-regulation from infancy onwards

• The capacity for empathy and nonverbal connection forms the basis of our intimate connections, the foundation of our healing
The Still Face Experiment:
Dr. Ed Tronick

• https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEbZht0

• Video clip
We learn to regulate our emotions through safe attachment experiences

- A safe attachment helps us to access our emotions and regulate those emotional states that are too overwhelming or intense to face alone.

self-regulation through safe attachment experiences

• “If this did not happen in childhood, it can still happen in adulthood through developing secure attachments and experiencing emotional dysregulation followed by corrective emotional experiences”.

A corrective emotional experience in therapy

• “Most clients remember ‘special moments’ of authentic person-to-person connection with their therapists, moments that altered their relationship with him or her and thereby their sense of themselves.

We believe that these moments of inter-subjective meeting constitute a pivotal part of the change process.”

— (Lyons-Ruth, 1998.“Implicit relational knowing” )
How much do you trust your GUT?

- Implicit relational knowing
- Providing safe relational space: treasuring the other’s otherness
- Secure attachment: Unconditional Positive regard, empathy (emotional attunement)
The importance of emotion for maturation

“that which was discarded (emotion) has become the key to the unfolding of human potential - that which MOVES us, grows us up.”

- Emotion is at the heart of how maturation is orchestrated

Heart Matters: the science of emotion

Gordon Neufeld, PhD
Developmental & Clinical Psychologist

science has come to the place where we now can make sense of emotion – key to understanding human nature
Emotion: the key to transformation

Engine of Maturation
Five Steps to emotional health and maturity

- expressing
- feeling
- naming
- mixing
- reflecting
Five Steps to emotional health and maturity

- Expressing
- Naming
- Feeling
- Mixing
- Reflecting

Accept/Invite/Assist

- Create channels for, and remove the impediments to, emotional expression
Step 1: Expressing emotion

• In a safe relational space

• The role of the counsellor – secure attachment

• The counselling relationship – a container for grief and mixed emotions
ACT: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

- Self-compassion
- Mindfulness
- Making space for emotions to be acknowledged and embraced (unlike old CBT model which rushed past the emotion and focused on the distorted cognition, to be rectified by a behavioural intervention)
An understanding of emotional expression helps explain ...

- why emotional movement alone can lead to emotional balance (eg, the best way of getting rid of a case of grumpiness is to encourage its expression)
Goal of attachment-based therapy

• To increase the client’s ability to access emotional states and to use significant relationships to regulate those emotional states that are too overwhelming or intense to face alone.

• To help client’s develop a secure attachment through corrective emotional experiences with the therapist.

Impact of thwarted emotional expression:

1. **DYSFUNCTION**: suppressed emotion cannot do its work

2. **DISTORTED** or **DISPLACED** expression

3. **DEPRESSION**: flattened affect

4. **FAILURE TO ADAPT** to life circumstances

5. **ERUPTION** of emotion (impulsivity or aggression)
FIVE STEPS
to emotional health and maturity

Extending

expressing

naming

mixing

feeling

reflecting

INTRODUCE/MATCH
Coach/teach the words that match the inner experience

ACCEPT/INVITE/ASSIST
- create channels for, and remove the impediments to, emotional expression
Step 2: naming the emotions

- coach/explore/teach the words/names of emotions that match the inner experience

- An understanding of emotional expression helps explain …

- the fatal flaw in resisting sadness in order to pursue happiness, is that happiness typically lies on the other side of sadness that has yet to be embraced
BALL OF GRIEF
A TANGLED "BALL" OF EMOTIONS
Emotion Seeks Consciousness

feelings
charge
action potential
energy state
impulses
neurotransmitters
synapse potential
chemistry of emotion
MOVIE: Inside out

SADNESS

None of the other Emotions really understand what Sadness's role is. Sadness would love to be more optimistic and helpful in keeping Riley happy, but she finds it so hard to be positive. Sometimes it seems like the best thing to do is just lie on the floor and have a good cry.
Five Steps to emotional health and maturity

- **Exprressing**: reflect the feeling
- **Mixing**: provide the safety and make it easy to feel
- **Naming**: teach the words that match the child’s inner experience
- **SHEild/COME ALONGSIDE**: create channels for, and remove the impediments to, emotional expression
- **ACCEPT/INVITE/ASSIST**: introduce/match

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Step 3: Feeling the Emotions
What keeps emotion from being felt?

1. Lack of **EXPRESSION** and thus movement
   - we can only feel emotion when it moves

2. Lack of **WORDS** for the feelings
   - words open the door to consciousness

3. Lack of **SAFETY** from wounding
   - the primary defense of the limbic system is to retreat from feeling
Processing of early attachment wounds

- Being ‘held’ by a safe attachment while processing early memories of wounding (active/abuse or passive/neglect)
- Deep empathic connection – limbic resonance and self-regulation
- wounding by others
- not being held on to in Deep attachment
- losses and traumas
- rejections

- shaming or put-downs
- not feeling liked, wanted or valued
- feeling “I’m too much to handle”
Processing of early attachment wounds

• Corrective Emotional Experiences (empathy from therapist, mirroring sadness and building capacity for other competing emotions to be experienced at the same time)

• Processing complex mixed emotions (in prefrontal cortex)
Step 4: Mixing the emotions

• Finding the right mix of emotions
• Competing emotions – ambivalence
• Opposite of black/white, all or nothing thinking
Five Steps to emotional health and maturity

expressing

naming

feeling

mixing

reflecting

- find the ‘answer’ to the troublesome impulses and get the right mix

ACCEPT/INVITE/ASSIST

INTRODUCE/MATCH

SHIELD/COME ALONGSIDE

DRAW OUT
What keeps feelings from mixing?

I. Vulnerable emotions are not felt

- emotions can only mix when they are felt and can only be felt if expressed and named
Inside out

• Dinner scene: Riley’s aggressive outburst

• https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-TaHEvjYHU

• Can’t change the situation
• Can’t feel her soft heart (no tears – Joy is working hard not to let Sadness touch any memories)
An Adaptive Person is:

- Able to adapt to change
- Able to handle adversity (resilient)
- Resourceful
- Able to find ways around futility (looking for other options, thinking outside the box)
- Able to learn from mistakes
- Able to register that something is not working, abandon it and find alternative solutions
- Able to accept limits, rules, restrictions and reality without having a meltdown
The key to adaptation

• A soft heart
• Not defended against vulnerability
• Safe to have tears and not be rejected or shamed
Tears of Futility before Adaptation

Tears are prayers too.
They travel to God
when we can’t speak.

~Psalm 56:8~
The Serenity Prayer

God grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change;
Courage to change the things I can;
And wisdom to know the difference.
Vulnerable feelings are more likely to be defended against

feeling **wounded** (hurt, anguish, pain, rejection, abandonment)
feelings of **dependence** (neediness, missing, loneliness, insecurity, emptiness)
feelings of **shyness** and timidity
feelings of **embarrassment** (including blushing)
feelings of **shame** (that something is wrong with me)
feelings of **futility** (sadness, disappointment, grief, sorrow)
feelings of **alarm** (apprehension, unsafe, anxiety and fear)
feelings of **caring** (compassion, empathy, devotion, concern, invested in)
feelings of **responsibility** (feel badly, remorse)
Every possible emotional overlap in *Inside Out*

Joy and Sadness make melancholy. But what do the other emotions add up to?

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<th>Joy</th>
<th>Sadness</th>
<th>Disgust</th>
<th>Fear</th>
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<td>Ecstasy</td>
<td>Melancholy</td>
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<td>Surprise</td>
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<td>Sadness</td>
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SOURCE: Photos from Disney/Pixar

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impulses to react & caring about impact = SELF-CONTROL

frustration & caring feelings = PATIENCE

fear of the dragon & caring about the treasure = COURAGE

concern for self & caring for another = CONSIDERATION

impulses to get even & caring feelings = FORGIVENESS

limitations & caring enough to make something work = SACRIFICE
What keeps feelings from mixing?

1. Vulnerable emotions are not felt
   - emotions can only mix when they are felt

2. Prefrontal cortex is not developed
   - starts between ages 5-7 and takes time and conducive conditions to develop
Prefrontal Cortex
Optimal sculpting of the prefrontal cortex through healthy early relationship allows us to:

• trust others
• think well of ourselves
• regulate our emotions
• maintain positive expectations,
• utilize our intellectual and emotional intelligence in moment-to-moment problem solving

“for many of our early years, we use our parents’ frontal lobes, in a sense, as an external prosthetic brain.”
Impulsivity and self-destructive behaviour

• Impulsivity is a classic sign of non-integrative functioning in the pre-frontal cortex
• When the limbic brain is unable to process more than one emotion at a time – no capacity for mixed emotions

Client struggling with impulsive/aggressive outbursts
Case Study: Attachment-based parent consulting work

Mother had sought help in the adolescent mental health system but had mostly been given diagnoses (ADHD, Opposition Defiant Disorder ODD, Autism Spectrum Disorder ASD). Then she ‘fell out of the system’.

• Single Mother of an 11 year old son
• Presenting issues:
  – bullying her,
  – threatening her with a knife,
  – erupting in aggression,
  – impulsivity
  – obsessive tendencies (foot phobia)
Attachment based parent consulting work


His behaviour due to insecure attachment and anxiety
  she did not believe that she would be enough of an answer for him:
  she had lost her Alpha lead in the relationship.

Focus of the work:
Processing her past attachment wounds
  Ex-partner: “domineering and abusive” (triggering trauma responses in her)
Heal the attachment with son
ATTACHMENT Roots: Gordon Neufeld – Hold on to your kids (chapter 6)
results after 6 months

• After a few sessions I could see some change, an internal shift had taken place and she was coming more into an Alpha position.

• Ruth: “Where did you get your beautiful Alpha from?”

• She replied without missing a beat: “From you; you have become my safe place.”

• She went on to say that she had come to realise that she needed to help her son feel safe in the world: “I try to be safe for him as you have been to me.”
the power of a corrective emotional experience

a safe attachment within the client-counsellor relationship, emanating into the parent-child subsystem in the family.

• Spiritual dimension of healing:
• Client: “God does this to me – he holds me close, like a small child cradled in his arms”.

What keeps emotions from mixing?

1. Vulnerable emotions are not felt
   - emotions can only mix when they are felt

2. Prefrontal cortex is not developed
   - starts between ages 5-7 and takes time and conducive conditions to develop

3. Inner conflict is not embraced
   - must be room for mixed feelings
**Five Steps**

to emotional health and maturity

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**Reflecting**

**Mixing**

**Naming**

**Expressing**

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**Introduce/Match**

**Accept/Invite/Assist**

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**Draw Out**

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**Shield/Come Alongside**

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**Responsible Sharing**

- provide the opportunities and the materials

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Step 5: Reflecting the emotions

- Empathic reflection on emotions
- Taking up a relationship with the emotions
- As victim or empowered
- Impulses or controlled behaviour
Movie: Inside out

• Riley comes back home

• [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJ673rIeSNo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJ673rIeSNo)

• Experiencing mixed emotions is healthy and normal - integration

• Development of the prefrontal cortex – capacity for integrative functioning
Two ways of processing a negative event

**Victim**
- Blaming
- Critical/judgemental
- Helplessness
- Powerlessness
- Despair
- Depression (learned helplessness or passive defiance/powerless anger)

**Empowered**
- Take responsibility
- Stay neutral/non-judgemental
- Stay present: “It is what it is”
- Examine your range of choices available
- Take action: “What can I do?”
- Feel and be empowered
"I am who I am because the tears of my past have watered the magnificence of my present."

– Dr. Steve Maraboli
REFERENCES


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Contact info

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