

Grief and Loss

in a Trauma and Attachment Context

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Grief and Loss Defined by Dictionary.com

- Grief

- keen mental suffering or distress over affliction or loss; sharp sorrow; painful regret
- a cause or occasion of keen distress or sorrow

- Loss

- detriment, disadvantage, or deprivation from failure to keep, have, or get
- the state of being deprived of or of being without something that one has had
- death, or the fact of being dead
- the accidental or inadvertent losing of something dropped, misplaced, stolen, etc.
- a losing by defeat; failure to win

Kubler-Ross Stages of Grief

Denial



Bargaining



Anger



Depression



Acceptance

Trauma and Attachment defined once again by Dictionary.com

- Trauma
 - an experience that produces psychological injury or pain.
- Attachment
 - an emotional bond between an infant or toddler and primary caregiver, a strong bond being vital for the child's normal behavioral and social development.
 - an enduring emotional bond that develops between one adult and another in an intimate relationship

Establishing the Construct

- Grief is the physical and emotional response to a Loss
- A Loss can rise to the level of being considered Traumatic
- Attachment is what can be disrupted by Trauma

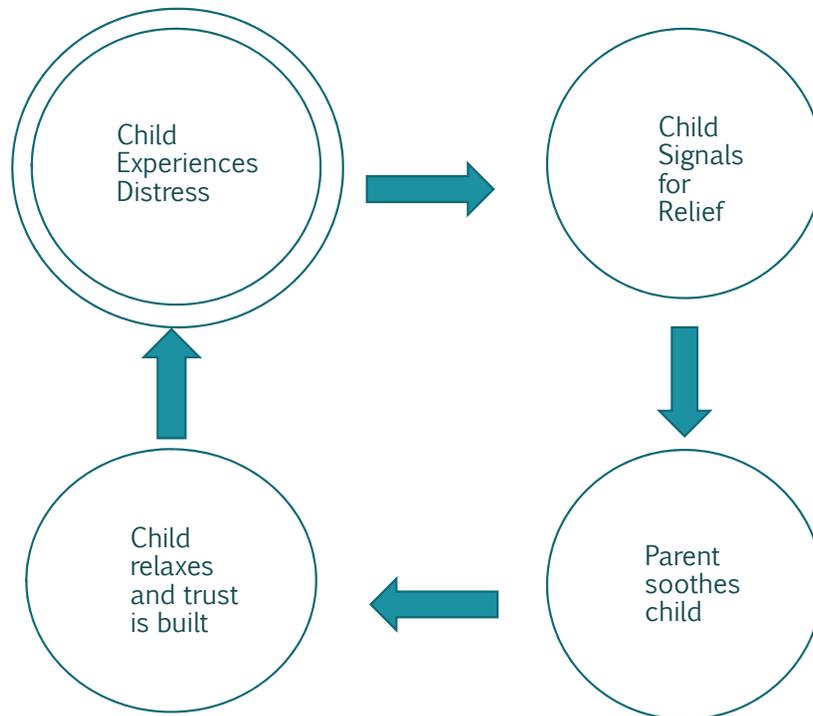


A Closer Look at Attachment

- How is it formed?
- Why is it important?

How is Attachment Formed?

- Arousal Relaxation Cycle (1)



(2)

Brain Stem

Regulates breathing, heart rate, etc. Most basic functions to maintain life. Forms very early in utero.

Amygdala

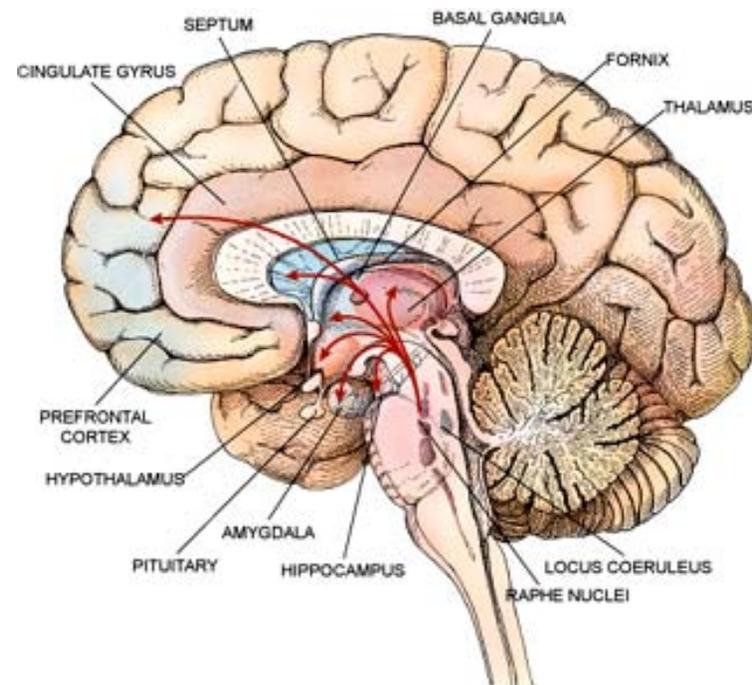
Emotion Center; Fight, Flight, or Freeze. Where we feel fear or pleasure. Present in utero and at birth.

Hippocampus

Short-term memory. Helps regulate the Amygdala. Develops by age 5.

Orbitofrontal Cortex

Social/Emotional Control Center. Works w/ Hippocampus to regulate Amygdala. Develops by age 25.



Why Is Attachment Important?

- Our ability to regulate our own emotions is dependent on our first experiences with co-regulation.
- Our behaviors are tied to our emotions.
- We behave to soothe negative emotions or increase positive emotions.
- Emotional regulation is a skill we must have in order to behave in positive and pro-social ways.
- The brain will either become strong with ability to hold soothing memories, or it will be deficient to manage necessary life tasks.

Attachment Milestones

- Infants attach to parents
- Children try to fit in with siblings and peers
- Teenagers start trying to fit in romantically
- Finding a life partner

Attachment where the rubber meets the road

- All of these milestones are important and when successfully navigated, we feel belonging and are more emotionally healthy.
- Since all of us have had some level of difficulty, there is some level of trauma in all of us.
- Addictions are the means our society seems prone to use for dealing with intense feelings of not fitting in; which brings a deep sense of loss

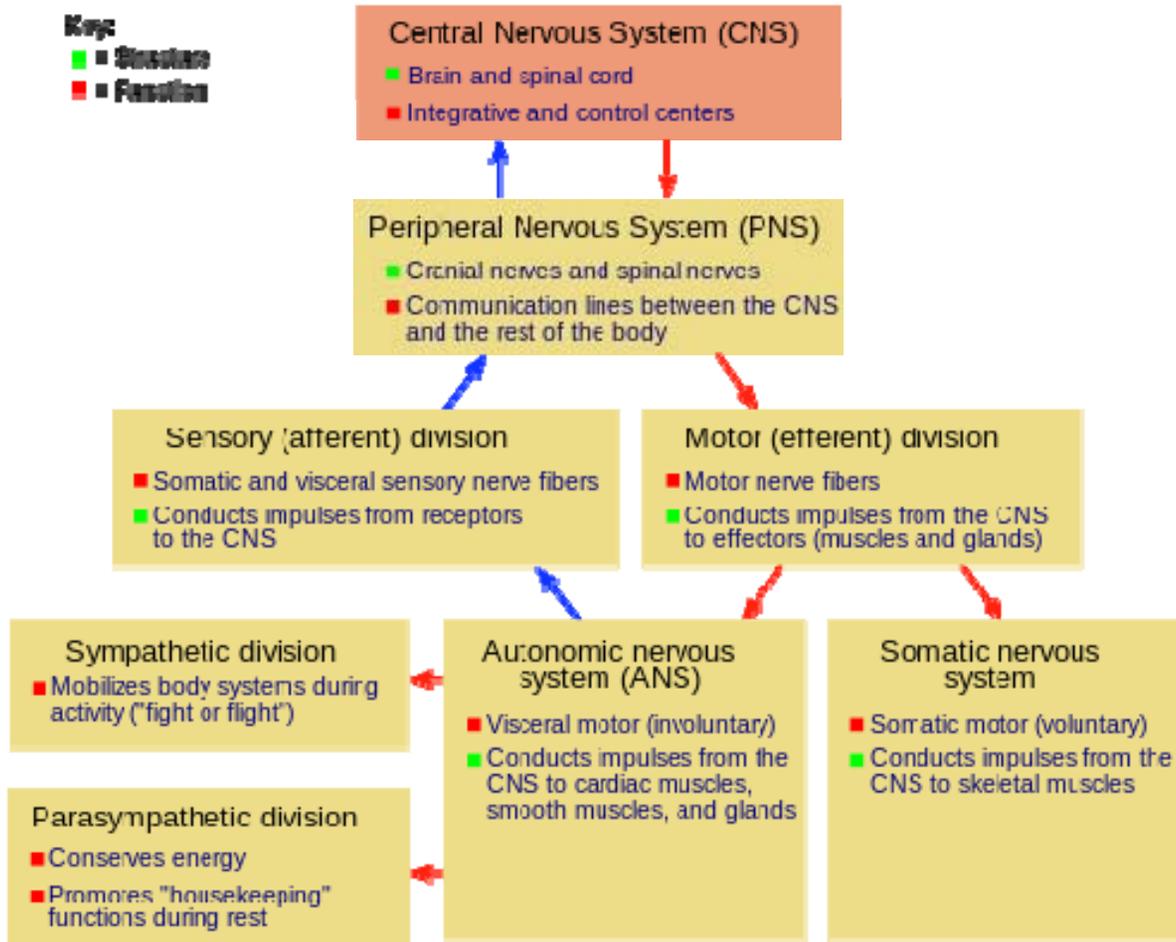


Attachment helps grow our brains' ability
to handle loss.

3 Ways Our Emotional Regulation System Becomes Damaged

- We can have struggles because we never built a proper brain structure for co and self emotional regulation, due to traumatic care.
- We can have genetic predispositions towards conditions like anxiety, depression, etc.
- We can suffer later insults to the previously intact emotional regulation system due to loss and the resulting crippling grief.

Our Nervous System (3)



Nerves Do Not Exist In a Vacuum

- There is a connection between the social world and our biological world
- Our experiences have an effect on our nervous system
- Losses and the resulting grief have a major impact on our nervous system
- The use of relationship to help a person regulate their internal states is a logical step
- We see the need for more than just Cognitive approaches, since we are dealing with internal states that are deeply dependent on lower brain structures.

Window of Tolerance (Poly-Vagal Theory) (4)

State of Hyper-Arousal

- Sympathetic system activated: Acceleration of autonomic nervous system response – increased heart rate and blood pressure, increased blood flow to large muscles, etc.
- Fight/flight response activated: state of hyper-vigilance, anxiety, perception of danger
- Thinking is either rigid or chaotic
- Pre-frontal cortex not activated – processing through limbic/brainstem/survival mechanisms of the brain
- **No new learning can take place**

Optimal Zone of Arousal – Window of Tolerance

- Ventral vagal nerve/parasympathetic system stimulated: Deceleration of autonomic nervous system response – body regulated, fear modulated, greater access to intuition and insight
- Social engagement system activated (connectedness with others)
- Self-soothing/emotional regulation system activated
- Full activation of pre-frontal cortex
- State of mind is calm, alert, relaxed, aware, mindful, flexible, accepting, energetic, coherent, empathetic
- Experience full range of emotions with a sense of control and awareness of options
- **New Learning can take place**

State of Hypo-Arousal

- Dorsal vagal nerve/parasympathetic system activated: Extreme deceleration of autonomic nervous system response – decreased heart rate and blood pressure, dissociation of awareness, etc.
 - Depression
 - Isolation/withdrawal, flop/shut-down response
 - **No new learning can take place**
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Lessons from Poly-Vagal Theory

- According to Poly-vagal theory: trauma, loss, or other stressful events can really mess with our autonomic states, and therefore our behaviors follow in response to try and modulate those autonomic states.
- Our digestive system along with other internal organs are also affected by our stress.
- People who have suffered trauma or who never really developed a healthy emotional regulation system have a more difficult time regulating with the ventral vagal nerve, and may swing back and forth from Hyper Arousal or Hypo Arousal or may get stuck on either side.
- Staying in the window of tolerance is adaptive and helpful for our emotional and physical health.
- The idea is to help a person stay in the window of tolerance through connectedness, relationship, soothing and they will be optimally repairing the grief from the losses they experience.

The Effects of Traumatic Losses

- The earlier the traumatic loss the more profound the effects may be.
- Major losses, even if it is a loss of trust in a safe world, can be seen as disruptions in the development of a healthy brain's ability to regulate the emotions.
- There is a disruption in the ability to effectively and appropriately signal others for help soothing. (Arousal Relaxation Cycle or Circle of Security models)
- When others do try and help it may not be as easily recognized as helpful.

The Effects of Traumatic Losses

- Losses can happen at any stage in our lives.
- We are deeply affected by the loss of what we once organized our ability to regulate our emotions on.
- Think about how a person has to readjust at the loss of a parent.
- Without a healthy functioning emotional regulation system there is more reliance throughout the life span on substances or other instant gratification means.

Applications for Treatment

- Effective treatment for losses should focus on the very same pattern that helped us feel safe and soothed from the beginning: Our attachment relationships.
- We can not ignore the underlying losses that clients are experiencing.
- Easier to focus on behavior rather than see the underlying hurts
- Cognitive therapy is not likely very effective when major trauma is involved; Cognitive theory is dependent on higher cognition (Cortex level)

Applications for Treatment

- Help clients tap into their attachment resources
- Help them increase their ability to seek out, signal, and effectively get others to nurture them
- Get to the deeper issues with substance abuse or other addiction issues

A Substitute for Attachment?

- Is it any wonder that one of the highest risk times for substance abuse is with the loss or feared loss of close interpersonal relationships?
- With so much hurt on the line, should we even form attachments?
- If we never do, we never form the true capacity for emotional regulation and are forced to regulate from substance to substance or from instant gratification to instant gratification.
- Ever searching and never feeling true satisfaction.

The Power of Social Networks

- Why is it that men seem to die sooner after their spouse dies compared to when women outlive their spouse?
- “He (Espinosa) found men who are grieving after their wife's death experience a 30% increase in mortality. For women, there is no increased chance of dying due to the loss of their husband.” (5)

Study done by Javier Espinosa, who led the study at the Rochester Institute of Technology in America

- One possible explanation could be that women seem to have stronger social networks.



The Big Picture of Treatment

As we approach treatment of grief and loss:

1. Understanding
2. Identifying
3. Accepting
4. Changing



Understanding:

“The man with insight enough to admit his limitations comes nearest to perfection.”

– Johann Wolfgang von Goethe



Identifying:

“The greatest good you can do for another is not just to share your riches, but to reveal to him his own.”

– Benjamin Disraeli



Acceptance:

We cannot change anything unless we first accept it. Condemnation doesn't liberate, it oppresses.

– Carl Jung



Change:

“On the Plains of Hesitation bleach the bones of countless millions who, at the Dawn of Victory, sat down to wait, and waiting – died!”

– George W. Cecil

“Finding ourselves takes time. It is hard work and it is worth doing.”

– Anne Wilson Schaef

References

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