

Becoming a Secure Base and Safe Haven to Others (i) by being emotionally available first to self



We cannot give what we do not have. We do not have because we did not receive. Like a quarter cup of coffee, we cannot pour out tea. If a full cup is needed, we fall short. The incidents below illustrate this.

A four year old boy ran to his parents, wailing loudly. He was pushed by boys twice his age who were impatient with him in the play tunnel. His parents did not witness this. They were puzzled by his distress. Initially showing concern, their patience waned when he could not be pacified. Neither could they make him explain what had happened.

The Father lost his cool and said sternly, "If you do not stop, then we head straight home!" The Mother stepped in to ask again where he had hurt himself. The child shook his head and wailed louder. She continued to ask if he had enough of the playground or if he preferred to go home.

What did the distressed child need? From whom did he get more of what he needed? With whom did he feel safer?

The child would likely experience his father as not being emotionally available to him. He would feel intuitively that the Father wanted him to get over with the distress so that he himself could feel ok. He may begin to wonder if his father was there because he wanted to be a good parent and not because he wanted him to have fun. What happened would make him feel more secure

and safer with his mother than with his father.

In this other incident, Jane* had just collected her PSLE results. She did not do well enough to get into the school of her choice. That evening, she sulked and refused dinner. Like the boy's father, instead of tuning in to her disappointment and offering her guidance to manage her distress, her father managed her behaviour instead and 'punished' her for her emotions by threatening to make her wash the dishes if she did not join them then.

There is a place and a need for behaviour management. The fathers had done it at the exclusion of attending to the emotional needs of the children. They were not emotionally available to them when their children needed them.

Like the fathers above, we can be with our loved ones physically, send them to school, work, do stuff with them and think we are with them emotionally. When they need us to be attuned to their inner worlds, we are unable to. As a result, we cannot empathise with, comfort them, emotionally engage nor connect with them, let alone help them to navigate or regulate their emotions appropriately.

There is no doubt that the fathers above care for their children. The boy's father offered 'instrumental-care'. Figuratively speaking, his son would experience him as coldly offering a band-aid and walking away. The Mother at least offered a little more of the nurturing-care the child needed. As for Jane, she would have perceived her father's reaction to her display of emotions as outright disapproval; like an unspoken 'No, we do not go there' injunction. The Father, on the other hand, if questioned, would say it was his responsibility to manage her behaviour out of caring for her.

When we are emotionally available, we will naturally offer nurturing care. We perceive the need and attend to it with soothing words and gentle touch. We will approach the person in need with tenderness and concern.

These are clearly absent in the children's fathers. This would cause the children to experience their fathers as not being concerned about how they were feeling. If the above are samples of interactions that repeat themselves over time, which tend to be the case, frustrations and resentment will build up in the children. These cause rifts in the parent-child relationship.

**fictitious name*

Connect-Point

'Nothing changes until you do' (Unknown)

What would tuning into another's inner world look like? Empathy and genuine concern would be present.

We may say to the boy: "Something must have upset you terribly for you to not be able to stop crying. We want to help you, but if you don't stop to tell us, we will not be able to do that."

And to the girl: "There is no point for us to be scolding you now for your results. We can see how disappointed you are over the outcome. We are too. Let's talk about it after dinner."

We can only tune-in when we are emotionally 'with' them, be it a child, teenager, young adult or our spouse. When we are, we will be totally open to hear them out, empathise without being quick to judge or impose our views. We will be open for discussions and negotiations. We will not be dismissive nor avoidant.

Why were the fathers unable to tune in to their children and hence were emotionally unavailable to them? They are likely to have parents who were also not emotionally available to them. They were probably related to in the same way they now interact with their children. They would have been raised in environments where displaying emotions was frowned upon. Their parents may have parented from an unhealthy belief like 'Allowing display of emotions encourages wimpy behaviour.' Or from fears such as; 'I cannot cope with another person's vulnerability.' 'Expressing emotions get us into trouble.' etc. Hence, they cannot give what they have not themselves received.

If the relationship patterns above describe yours with your loved ones, fraught with rifts and frustrations, you may want to take a step back. Could your 'not being emotionally available' be the issue? Is it time to do something different?

Where do we start? We begin with being available to ourselves. You cannot give what you don't already have. You didn't receive it from your parents. It is time to receive it from yourself. Yes, you can receive, what you did not from your parents, from yourself now.

This calls for a new practice of being. Being there for yourself. Your journey thus far, has been one of taking reference from outside of yourself. You may have felt unaccepted and rejected by others, causing you to reject and hate yourself. It is time to dispel that self-loathing and self-rejecting. Begin a journey of self-compassion. Be self-nurturing and self-forgiving, not self-judgemental and self-critical. Begin to desire to be open to self and be self-aware, allowing yourself to feel and connect. Move away from your habit of running away, dismissing or suppressing your emotions. Learn new skills; teach yourself to manage your emotions appropriately, not acting out even as you acknowledge and connect with them. Above all, create for yourself space to self-reflect.

You are embarking on a new journey. It's a journey of discovering and reaching deep inside of you to find the caring and nurturing capacities you never knew you possessed. It helps if you have someone to walk with you, a confidante or a counsellor. When you find it, you offer it first to yourself, then are you able to offer them to those you love. And be emotionally available to them, as their secure base and safe haven.

