

Making sense of our Insecurities for Better Relationships



It was a beautiful picture. There was delight on the 4-year old's face as his father gave him a light push, encouraging him on. The boy dashed towards the slide. At the top of the steps, the boy waved as if to say, "Watch me, I am going to embark on an adventure!" The father waved back knowingly, with approval. The boy had a few rounds on the slide before running towards his father. The latter smiled and playfully ruffled his son's hair. No words were exchanged. Yet so much was 'spoken'. At one point, the boy returned, one hand rubbing his bum. The father asked, "You landed too hard on your bum?" With his hand still soothing the sore, he nodded, clearly upset.

"You may want to rest your bum before you continue?" Pleased with that suggestion, he was contented to be an observer for about ten minutes before he took off again.

If this were one of many pieces making up a complete picture, what would it look like? If all the pieces depict similar themes;- that of the parent interacting appropriately, sensitively, responsively and positively with his kid? If these were consistently, repeatedly, followed through, at different stages of a child's development, the complete picture would be one where all the conditions for a child to form secure attachment with his parent are fully present. The child growing up under such conditions would form strong secure attachment with this parent. This, in the actual world, is almost impossible to achieve.

What does a contrasting picture look like? It is one of horrible negligence or complete abandonment. Most pictures fall somewhere in between. It is of a child with parents who resist letting their kids explore on their own, transmitting their own fears onto them. Another is of those who over privilege or overprotect their children, giving them instructions at every step. There are also the emotionally unavailable parents. The child cannot run to them because they are either too impatient, too cluttered in their lives or too emotionally spent to be able to connect, empathise, relate, care or meet their child's needs. To 'just be with' them emotionally.

Psychologist Jude Cassidy believes that when a child experiences secure attachment, it grows in him a sense of 'confidence in the possibility of goodness' in himself and in others. He believes in his own goodness and believes in the goodness of others.

A helpless baby will naturally form attachment with whoever comes their way. Hence, Dan Siegel, the guru of Secure Attachment Theory, believes that attachment happens. It is the differences in the quality of the attachment that we are talking about. The differences lie in the extent by which a child feels his parents are a 'secure base and a safe haven' to him.

A secure base arises from the child's need for ultimate autonomy. Every child needs a secure base to feel safe, self-empowered and assured to take off, discover and explore. It is in exploring and discovering that we thrive. What makes this base secure is a Safe Haven. It is where the 4 'S' are present-where a child feels 'safe, seen, secure, soothed' (Daniel Siegel). This is where a vulnerable child's emotional needs for love, protection, acceptance, belonging, validation and comfort etc, on top of all his physical needs for food, shelter and safety are met. When these conditions that are conducive for him to explore and thrive are present at every stage of his development, his future chances of securing a livelihood, being a contributing member of society, forming friendships, maintaining meaningful relationships, managing a family etc are correspondingly enhanced.

Connect-Point

Secure attachment in a child's earliest relationships lays the foundation for good future relationships. Yet strong secure attachment is hard to come by. It's easy to be 'emotionally with' an adorable child who needs us. It's quite a different story with our strong-headed, self-centred and seemingly defiant teenagers. Hence, it is not surprising that even with the most well-intentioned parents, we grow up with attachment issues of varying degrees, resulting in us carrying shades of insecurity. These insecurities show up in our relationships in myriad of ways. A few are highlighted here.

Many of us would have experienced times with our first caregivers when our distress or frustrations were not understood. Our need for comfort might have instead been met with annoyance or even rejection. If this happened often enough, we might form a belief that 'some things must be kept to myself. I don't trust others to share them with me'. An inner vow such as: '-I must look out for myself' might evolve in the process. If this is the case, we may go into relationships with some handicap. We may not be able to offer ourselves unreservedly and unconditionally to the other. We may also not be fully present or available and cannot fully enjoy what the other person offers. We may grow a tendency to self-protect and resort to unhealthy relationship practices, such as becoming transactional (previous article) or triangulating.

We triangulate when we consciously or sub-consciously find ourselves manipulating the relationships by involving a third party. For instance, when we have a spousal conflict, we pull a third person to our side, usually our child, to strengthen our case against our spouse, their father or mother. In the process we sow mistrust and drive a wedge between parties.

A child's need for secure attachment when not met over a long time will build up toxic stress within him. This can create in him a high alert for danger, fear or anxiety. Along with these may be beliefs such as: - 'I am not good enough to have my parents' attention. I don't have what it takes to sustain any relationship. People will walk out on me. I have to work hard at keeping my relationships, etc.' Depending on the child's personality, this fear manifests itself in different ways. Some may become overly subservient and overly compliant. Others become hypervigilant, easily suspicious and

even naggy. With some others, the fears turn into controlling and abusive behaviours, perpetuating toxic relationships.

Someone once said in jest," ...because we were all raised by human beings, we were raised imperfectly." How true! And we perpetuate that imperfection on our children too. Getting to the root of our insecurity is hence not about judging or blaming our parents for the upbringing we received resulting in us feeling insecure. It is for us to be aware, recognise and then acknowledge if our insecurity caused by weak attachment has affected our current relationships. And if they have, then what? There is no turning back the clock. Yet all is not lost. What we did not receive from our caregivers, we can make it up to ourselves through the process of 'reparenting' or 'self-parenting'.

'Reparenting' in this context is about becoming the secure base and safe haven to ourselves, for ourselves (look out for the next article). We extend self-compassion to our inner child and coach him/her to grow the capacity to regulate and soothe self. We sharpen our ability to empathise with ourselves and with others. When we receive well, even if it is from ourselves, we can then be available to others as their secure base and safe haven. We can bring something new into our existing relationships to make them more satisfying.

