



Therapy Gems©

From the Mind of a Child with Reactive Attachment Disorder: A Story for My Parents of My Life, Mind, Brain, Emotions, and Behavior

Version 1.2

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Purpose: I wrote this document so therapists and parents can master the point of view needed for them to develop the *empathic attunement necessary* to re-awaken the child's *attachment system*. The emotionally wounded child's psychological defenses may close the attachment process and prevent. Improvement in the behavioral manifestations of damaged attachment does not require taking control over the child, but rather building more secure, stable attachments.

I want to help parents understand the mind and behavior of the child experiencing attachment wounds. Only then can the child begin to attach and then can grow emotionally, mentally, and socially.

Too often, the therapeutic effort or the parents' approach reinforces the child's dysfunctional *Internal Working Model of the World* and closes the child's *attachment system*. A harsh or punitive stance, attempting to control by threats or rejection, or a disciplinary approach tend to reinforce the existing Internal Working Model. When it is a *closed system*, like any other closed system, it admits no influence from the outside, no feedback essential to re-opening and changing that system.

This is written as a narrative from the point of view of the child, but not in a child's language. I see it as a floor exercise done by the therapist interacting with the parents. Parents can read along. Or parents can do the floor exercise side-by-side with the therapist and can read it aloud.

I italicized any professional terminology.

Imagine a straight line across the floor with a circular area at the end. The line is the chronology of the child's internal experience from birth onward. We assume the child was born into a neglectful family. If the attachment wound is from one of the other major causes, including abuse, separation, parental illness, or early loss, modify the 'performance' as needed.

The circle at the end is the current interactional pattern in the family. We call the interactional pattern and roles in a family the *family system*. The circle is the result of the child's *Internal Working Model* interacting with the parents' totally different Models and expectations. For that is the external, observable structure of the current problem. The straight line shows the evolution and power of the deeper, internal mental structure of the problem.

This exercise must be delivered authentically. So reading it is not as effective as acting it with sincerity and understanding. It is important to engage parents by making the exercise interactive.

When referring to earlier experiences from a later point in time, look back to the beginning of the line, pointing there, to the early life origins of the *Internal Working Model*. Repeatedly looking back to origins will help make the child's internal psychology more clear. It will be cleared how the child's behavior is a function of what was experienced and how that was internalized.

If you have assessed the parents' (caretakers') expectations and their history of attachment, security, and loss, you will be a better guide to the challenges this family faces. You can see how any wounds or insecurities in the parents' attachment history are triggered by the child.

I - Birth and the First Year of My Wounded Emotional Life

Stand at the starting point of the line. While going through section I, move forward a small distance as if representing the passage of time.

NEGLECT! After I was born, I was neglected. My stomach hurt from lack of feeding. My bottom hurt from lack of changing. I ached from not being picked up and comforted.



Maybe my parents were on drugs or depressed or mentally ill. Maybe they just didn't want me.

But I was in all kinds of pain all the time. I was hungry in my stomach and hungry in my soul.

I cried and cried. No one was coming. I felt so bad, it felt like I would die. I didn't know that then the way I do know. My body knew it. So, **now it is built into my body. The hurt and fear is in my body. It shaped my brain.** That's one reason why you can't reason with my feelings. I have become the trauma of my life.

EARLY SCHEMA. Though inconsistently, I was fed. I learned adults can feed you, although maybe they hardly do that. But they also are not there when you need them. They are depriving. Sometimes they are so harsh. Often, they just go away. I'll never forget that – that is the truth of my life. **MISTRUST.** That's it.

The reason for what you do to me must be something wrong with ME. It must be the rotten bad core down the middle of me. Or maybe just I am unlovable. Period.

A *schema* is not just a thought or belief. It's a way of filtering perceptions of the world and experiencing life. Not only that, it is so deeply ingrained as to be a rule of living, a way of life. All times. In all places. With all people. It is in the fabric of the brain. Built in from then on.

My earliest schemata are mistrust, deprivation, expecting to hurt, aloneness, inner badness, and fearing for my life.



I'll repeat that. Mistrust, deprivation, expecting to hurt, aloneness, inner badness, and fearing for my life.

If you had raised me from birth, you may have kissed me and shown love many times a day. Imagine the 3000 or 4000 signs of love you may have given me that I didn't receive that year. Imagine the 3000 times I received

something opposite.

What could I possibly have concluded about that?

I'll tell you. **Mistrust, deprivation, expecting to hurt, aloneness, inner badness, and fearing for my life.**

Now, when you try to feed me physically or emotionally or take care of me, I start to associate to those unpleasant memories in my body and wonder if I will ever be fed again or if I will be deprived. My body has not forgotten that caretakers are depriving. They all go away. So I'll stay away and not let them get close.

I have only myself. You may give me things; but I still believe I will be deprived, if not now, then soon. You may be here, but as angry as you get at me so often and as punitive as you may be towards me, I know you'll go away, if not now, then later. You must not realize that the punishments mean you are not with me; you are against me. So many things you do make me feel you are not with me and I'm alone; so I will react to that fear.

I know not to trust you when you say you love me. All that punishment proves you don't. Adults lie. So I lie. I have to do that to avoid your rejection and punishment. I can't see ahead to how that might make you punish me all the more.

It does not matter if you have no intention of betraying me or letting me down. I not only expect you will sooner or later, I unwittingly cause you to.

SENSORY-MOTOR LEARNING. Of course, I learned all that before I could speak or think these beliefs in words. They are sensory and bodily memories. Don't trust. Isn't *basic trust and attachment* the main emotional achievement of the first year of life? Not for me.

Was I supposed to learn to feel my caretakers are there for safety, security, and protection? They weren't. I did not learn that. So I would not go to a caretaker like you to keep me safe. I would not notice if a caretaker left the room. You may think I am supposed to figure out your plan to be there for safety, security, and protection. But look back at what I've been through. How could I suddenly believe that or feel that no matter how hard you try?

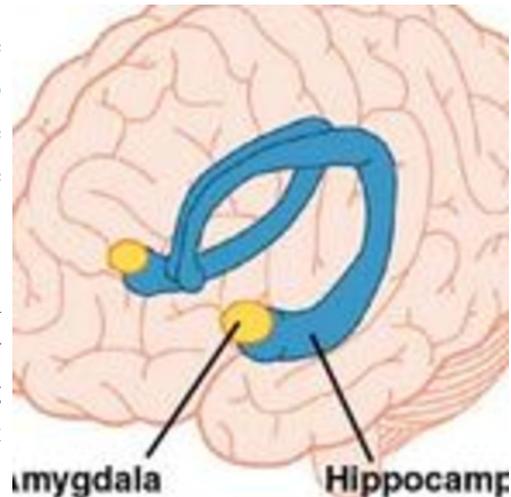
HARM TO BRAIN DEVELOPMENT. In my sensory system and my brain is the feeling that adults

are dangerous – they ignore you. They harm you. They go away.

The systems in my brain that should have built up feelings that my needs will be met did not develop normally. So the entire system remembers to fear. The *amygdala* in my brain is on hyper-alert for pain, and so it makes sure I remember mostly painful experiences.

Those special *mirror neurons* in the brain that experience a caretaker's empathy and joy in the child are supposed to mirror those feelings right inside the child's brain. So the child learns empathy and joy in return. That part of the brain gets stronger and the child cares about others.

But for me, those mirror neurons were not turned on, and so I didn't learn to show empathy and caring. Only suspicion, wariness, and aloneness. You show me caring now; but such a long time ago I stopped learning to feel it or trust it.



Or maybe they are turned on and they mirror abuse and neglect, so that is what I look for to mirror. I didn't develop much mirroring for the good feelings.

The brain system that is open to learning new emotional connections can no longer learn. That's the *hippocampus* and mine is smaller than it should be.

I mirror the world in my Inner Working Model, not the world you think you are presenting. Therefore, it makes sense to meet my Model's expectations of abuse, neglect, and abandonment with anger and neglect of you. You became the representative of that abuse.

Attachment behavior – wanting to be picked up, clinging to an adult's leg for safety, cuddling, those deep smiles between parent and child – was *extinguished* due to the absence of reinforcement from my caregivers. When it got no results, I forgot how.

You may think it's willful on my part; it's not willful. IT ...IS ...NOT ...WILLFUL. I just don't know how anymore. It's buried in me.

I may do something that looks like it is designed to hurt you. It may be. I may feel I need to get back at adults. Mostly, though, I'm just trying to take care of myself.



DYSREGULATION. I didn't learn to regulate my emotions of distress, fear, hurt, and anger. Those emotions come up so easily. I get so dys-regulated that in an instant I sometimes just get inconsolably furious and say mean things. Sometimes, I appear to be cold. A baby that gets no response first *protests* and after while gives up, goes cold. That's me. Protesting or cold. It's so fast and powerful that I can't control it.

Once it's triggered, I can't stop! The systems that build up that help a child regulate emotions so he or she does not get overwhelmed are not working for me.

It's called *limbic hijack*. The *limbic system* is the emotional memory, emotional control, and emotion experiencing center of the brain. It develops self-regulation over a 3-4 year period in part through the interaction of an infant with caregivers, absorbing their security in taking care of the child, their calm acceptance, and their consistency in meeting needs. That's how a child learns to regulate emotion. You see how emotional self-control is co-created by the child's brain and the caretaker(s) working together. When the child has neglectful, abusive, or inconsistent care, those circuits are under-developed or associate people with mainly negative emotions. When *inhibitory cortical circuits* are under-developed, the *limbic system* can completely take over in massive emotional scenes.

II - Age 2 and 3, The Wounds Deepen

Step forward one step.

I am a little older now, nearly two. Now I will describe what I experienced in those days.

INTERNAL WORKING MODEL, PART A. As I got a little older, I learned more about how adults around me are dangerous. They deprive and ignore me. They may strike me or say terrible things

about me. They may be inconsistent – when they give, they take away. They go away. **It must be because of something wrong with me.**

In the future, I will carry these deep beliefs into every new situation and I'll believe it even if you spend years taking care of me.

In order to understand how I could have been loved to so small a degree, I concluded *I am bad inside*, in the core place of the emptiness and hurt. I am worthless and unlovable. I have a rotten spot inside.

It must be something about me. I am unlovable and bad. No one wants me. **That's another schema, that I am unlovable.**

A scholar named John Bowlby explained *Inner Working Model*. We all need to predict where what we need will come from. We need to learn to predict the world. A person *mentally* represents, that means stores up inside, various life experiences into a conception of how the interpersonal world functions and how he or she is in that world. *At birth, the brain is ready to respond to the environment into which the child is born. The brain gets shaped for the environment into which the child is born.* The brain develops *representations* of caretakers and of self and of how self is treated by others. That *complex* of experiences includes what happens, as seen through the eyes of a young child. It includes others' behavior and the child's emotional reactions. Ultimately, the model is the *internalization* of the emotional characteristics of a child's relationships.

Later, someone may say I am loved. Why should I start believing that? Literally five thousand times – several times a day for one or two or three years – I learned I am not loved. Think about that. Like I said before, in a year, as many as 10 times a day a baby seeks care or responds to positive care. Maybe it's 20. So in a year it's over 5000 opportunities, maybe 2000, 3000, maybe 5000, for you to show a child his or her importance and value. That's 5000 times I learned the opposite. I learned that opening myself to attachment will end up being foolish – I'll be abandoned or hurt. Because of what I am, I won't be loved. I'll keep expecting what I learned to expect.

Strangers are not associated with all that harm to me and they may be more helpful. It is easier to go with strangers. I may receive something from them. You may have seen my record where it may have said *disinhibited social behavior*. Yes, I may be more comfortable checking out what strangers may give me.

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT. I feel these feelings in my heart and my body, and now I am beginning to think of them as actual ideas about myself and the world of adults. Another child may learn that what she does affects other people's feelings and to be more careful in what she says so as not to hurt others and not to get in trouble. I didn't learn that. Another child may learn that her needs will usually be met, that good behavior earns rewards, that adults can be generous. I didn't learn that.

So, I work to eat and to take care of myself. I'll accept food and shelter. But I believe I am unimportant. What you give me does not earn my trust. My thinking about life all becomes channeled into a few negative beliefs about myself and this world.

HARM TO BRAIN DEVELOPMENT. The part of my brain that learns to pay attention and plan ahead and to think about consequences – that's all in the *frontal cortex* – becomes under-developed. You may wonder at my impulsivity or why I keep doing or saying things that cause me trouble with you or hurt you. Why I lie and steal. There is no mystery!

You may mis-label me as manipulative. That is cruel. I hate accusatory words like that. That word says I am no good and you have pulled away. I'm just trying to survive. You may mis-label me as rebellious, obstinate, defiant, anti-social, or oppositional. That is rejecting and harmful. What I am doing is re-enacting what was done to me and enacting in my behavior what I feel. I am scared, but I don't have any way to talk about that. MY REACTIONS ARE AUTOMATIC.

Maybe I came into a stable family by now, by foster care or adoption. How could I trust that? How can I believe it will last? How could I show I appreciate it? How could I respond in the way you expect me to? I'm sorry to thwart your expectations.

III - Age 3 to 5, Permanent Wounds and Scars

Step forward one step.

INTERNAL WORKING MODEL, PART B. As I got a little older still, I turned off to ever being loved. It was not a choice! It's in my bones, in my soul.

I realized I will have to meet all my needs myself.

Think of it this way. Other kids, maybe other kids you yourself are raising, can be secure in their trust of you. Then, they can trust their own feelings. They can be secure enough to relax with you, to stop worrying about their place in the family. They trust other people to make good things happen. They expect themselves to make good things happen. So, again, they even trust their own feelings. Caregivers are supposed to be the source of comfort.

I worry they are the source of misery. I learned not to rely upon others emotionally. But that means I didn't learn to expect comfort and *self-soothing*. Accepting comfort is crucial to regulating internal states, those feelings of distress and anxiety I feel. Without that regulation, I feel intolerable levels of distress and helplessness.

HARM TO BRAIN DEVELOPMENT. My brain became on constant alert for more abuse or for more deprivation, the physical and the emotional sides of neglect. That's called *hyper-vigilance*. Adults will just harm you in the end.

This is the time for the brain to learn *cause-and-effect*. That means knowing my actions affect you and my actions have consequences in the world other than the primary goals toward which I am directing my actions. I want food, so I take it. That's a primary goal. I haven't learned there are consequences to how I do that and there is a socially acceptable way and an unacceptable way. That understanding means mastery of cause-and-effect.

Sure, as a child I learned how it works on physical objects. If I knock over a tower, it makes noise and it's funny. But here I mean social cause-and-effect. If I do something, I don't understand how that affects you. Remember, I didn't get to mirror love, joy, or someone delighted in me. I didn't get to learn how to understand other people's feelings. I can fear them, reject them, hurt them the way I am hurt, expect them to leave me; but I don't understand their feelings. I'm trying to survive. I don't understand why you react to that. And I cannot afford to care.

The brains of kids with attachment disorder have reduced gray matter in visual cortex at the back of the brain. That means fewer cells and fewer connections between cells. That means fewer ways to interpret what I see. So, I keep interpreting the same way.

You did not know this: The brains of kids like me have less sensitivity to rewards! One of the reward centers in the brain is called the striatum. For us, that part is less responsive to good things, to rewards. It's like being closed to new social and emotional learning. Remember, the older part

of the brain reacts to experiences and new situations as if we might be traumatized all over again, now or at any moment.

If I don't feel attached to you, then your praise doesn't mean much.

Some professionals think that turning off to love is a defense' against the rage a child feels from emotional neglect. They think that I manipulate, lie, and steal because I am angry with adults. They think that such anger prevents me from loving. They recommend *extinguishing* my behavior by having caretakers take total control, using systematic punishment, and removing privileges. The thought is that you will get me angry, then, they say, once I express my anger, the behaviors you do not like will stop. They recommend the parents force the child to submit to their will and stop being disobedient. As if I could get over what happened to me in the past and suddenly be better in the present! When I don't know how! Sometimes, a child will capitulate and learn to meet his or her needs by going along with the adults. To me, it just is more proof I am not loved and never should risk it. It's just torture and that means you hate me and don't want me. And those therapists give it the ironic and misleading name *Attachment Therapy*.

There is also that *Attachment Parenting*. That is a way to focus parents on developing a sense of a *secure attachment style* with their kids. It is not for repairing an *insecure attachment style* where a kid is attached but lives in fear of the attachment breaking down, or, in my case, an *attachment disorder* where I just don't feel connected.

Because of that, therapists who understand attachment don't use the term Attachment Therapy. People who really get people like me say they do *Attachment-Focused Therapy* or *Attachment Family Therapy*.

I do have what they all *defenses*. I have defenses against showing love and against getting hurt. I can tell you about them. Protection - I see others in light of my schemas, what I already believe about them. I also see them as a reflection of my diminished self. I am suspicious because I perceive people in light of my feelings about myself. Withdrawal - I isolate myself or I sit and fantasize about how I feel. Turning passive into active - that means if I have been injured, next time I have to act first, leave you first or injure you first. Dissociation - I may blank out so I don't have to remember how bad it all feels.

I will not likely feel much guilt when I react in a way that gets you enraged. I will mostly react from fear. When I do feel that scared, it will come out and show itself as prolonged crying, fury, nastiness,

destructiveness, or getting away. When that happens, I won't be able to "use your words" or tell you why. I just won't know how. And please don't say I am "acting out" when you just mean naughty.

But I probably will try your patience mightily. Or I may trigger you to feel as dys-regulated and hostile as I feel. That is another process called *projective identification*. I project an emotional state, then you identify with that state and live it, too. If I am scared, I will react *as if* you are scaring me. If I am angry, I will react as if you are enraging me. If I am sad, I will react as if you are leaving me. Those are called projections. I guess (project) from inside me what you are doing and thinking and your motives. But then you identify with what I put on you. And you then do what I thought you were doing all along, scaring, enraging, or leaving me! See, you lose control. You're dysregulated. You get out of your best self and you *rationalize* acting in the most terrifying ways towards me.

I'll say that again. You get triggered to act, and to rationalize acting, in the most terrifying ways towards me. You call it proper punishment. You call it consequences. As if I understood that I was supposed to feel bad and behave better! Can't you see it's not working because what you are rationalizing to be right is also not helpful. I suppose I made you feel helpless and you don't know what else to do!

Let's say you adopted me when I was this young or I was your foster child for a while first. Can't you see how the damage already done makes it hard for me to connect no matter what you try to do for me? Or maybe I seem pretty nice sometimes and even seem attached, but then I have those bouts of fear and lose control over it so fast.

IV - Fully Formed Attachment Disorder

Step forward one step.

ABANDONMENT ANXIETY. I can be nice sometimes. I may even make an attempt to repair my connection to you. After all, *the need for attachment is in everyone*. Because mine is so layered over with misery and defenses does not mean it is entirely gone. It's in me. I may make a small effort at connection or I may accept one from you, warily. That is when nothing is scaring me.

But it's so easy to trigger my inner terror. Remember that *limbic hijack* I mentioned earlier. What may seem innocent to others can threaten me with *abandonment*. To a baby, abandonment is death. The abandoned baby cannot survive.

So I can be in a state of *abandonment anxiety* – waiting for adults to throw me away sooner or later – or a state of *abandonment depression*, meaning I am sad, empty, and lost, like the baby that gives up trying to be held and assumes it really is abandoned.

Adults can reject me in so many ways they don't even realize. I suppose they don't intend it that way, but it is all rejection to me. They argue with me in a way that makes me feel I am a disappointment, a failure. If I do not meet your expectations, I will be sent away. That triggers me to react to you as if you really are sending me away right then. Then comes that *limbic hijack*. Wow. And sometimes adults say it right out. “We’ll send you back to where we got you.” “We don’t want you anymore.” And you think that is supposed to make me behave!

That is *parenting-by-rejection*. No child is likely to behave better after that. Please stop threatening me. For me, threats are not threats. I expect they really are going to happen.

By the way, you don't have to say it to me for me to know that you feel this way!

If anything triggers my fear of being sent away, I will react either with rage or with coldness. My soul will remember how it was when I was an infant and I will just react.

I don't usually react with guilt when I disappoint you. Why should I feel guilty? It feels more like YOU are the one hurting ME. I am more likely to be afraid.

Sometimes, thinking they can control me, parents take everything away from me – empty my room, remove the door.

Here is the thing. Control is something children learn from 18-42 months of age – what's dangerous, how to meet expectations for how to eat, holding hands in a parking lot, not touching the stove, using the toilet, following rules. *You see control is a big part of what healthy children learn*. But my damage was so much earlier than that. What you think is a control conflict between us is more a matter of life and death to me.

You will treat it as a control problem. I am not trying to control you. I am trying to control whether I get hurt.

Parents get into a battle of wills with kids like me. The parents think they have to follow through on some threat they made, some punishment they issue. I wish they had not gotten dysregulated

themselves. I wish they remained calm despite my behavior. I wish they had said a thousand times "We accept you just as you are." And that they meant it and were consistent.

But they think they have to follow through on some threat they should never have made. They THINK this is a contest wills. They could say "I was mistaken to get mad. That might have scared you. We accept you are you are."

Here is another puzzle. I want it all to change, but I can't believe it will. I'm not very open to it. So, in a way, I don't want anything to change. After all, new things could be painful or could lead to more losses!

INTERNAL WORKING MODEL, PART C. I do things that are totally emotionally logical to me and totally illogical to others. **Hoarding** food means I will be safe. **Lying** means I took care of myself. I want you to let it go.

I don't care about the exact truth since that may get me harmed. I tell what I need to in order to survive, to take care of myself.

Stealing? I don't always understand the idea of owning things in the way you do. I didn't have that base. So, rather than thinking of taking things or fibbing as something wrong that I should feel guilty about, I think of things as the means of being safer. Sometimes, possessions are something I can hold onto when I have lost so much. Maybe I give things away so other kids will accept me. If I can't count on adults, I have to take care of myself. Maybe sometimes I think you are making me miserable and I get back at you.

You may lecture me or try to teach me a lesson. I guess you have figured out by now that isn't going to work. You are talking to my higher brain when it is not online and my emotions are online. I'm quick -- no, instantaneous -- in hearing what you say as the message "You are not wanted."

Manipulative? They call me manipulative, but that is not it at all. I am only doing or saying what I need to in order to survive. I'm not actually manipulating you; I'm just trying not to get rejected. I am not doing it just to boss you around to get my way.

Controlling? I've heard you call me that. I don't get it at all. You say it when I am doing things to create a source of safety or sustenance around me.

V- Later Childhood and Attachment Disorder

Step forward one step.

I am older still. Trust? Forget it. Love? Forget it. I can cooperate sometimes. I am in a state of perpetual *hyper-alertness* to danger. To MORE TRAUMA.

You want to punish me by depriving me of my things, by threatening to reject me and to get rid of me. Well, I knew you don't really want me because how could anyone want to keep *me*? You are hurting me something fierce. The wound in my soul aches. I try to defend against that feeling by turning off to you.

You try to make me feel guilty or ungrateful. So what. That's about you – you think you did so much for me. You want my gratitude when I know for sure you are going to dump me.

Oh, you are punishing me for what you call stealing, which to me is surviving.

Remember how I started in life!!!! Empty belly, empty heart. With longing hiding somewhere inside behind those defenses.

I might cozy up to you. I might comply. I might look caring. The need for attachment is in me somewhere.

You're so puzzled when I take something, mess with your stuff, whack my adoptive sister. How can you fail to see into my heart where she is a rival for what I need? Or how she is lovable and loved and valuable and worthwhile, and I am not. In my world, it's a zero-sum game; someone gets the stuff, someone else gets none. So the one is loved and that means I get none. How can I be good to her consistently?

Some day, I will be physically mature. I know of an older girl, Sally J, who was at the gym where you took me to learn tennis. She seemed to get me. I learned she is like me. I learned she was adopted from South America at age 3. When I felt frustrated, she seemed to instinctively know how to respond to me so I would not sink into self-reproach and fear of you being disappointed in me to the point of thinking I'm a no-good child. Well, I get why Sally, when she was 17, ran away with her boyfriend. From the lectures I've gotten, I guess neither of them had money or much of a plan,

but just made an impulsive choice. From what Sally told me, it was like magical thinking. She idolized the guy. It was like she felt he was the solution to her pain and not liking herself. Personally, I didn't think he was all that nice. It didn't matter to Sally. When I'm that age, I wonder if I'll be looking for someone to magically make it right for me.

VI - How Our Troubled Family Interacts So Ineffectively

Step onto a circular path rather than a linear one. For each statement, step along the circle.

So here we are today, now. Watch what happens.

First, you asked if I did this or that, if I stole something or lied. You say, accusing me, “Why did you do that?” I hear not your words, but their emotional meaning to me, namely, “YOU’RE NO GOOD. GO AWAY.”

I did not master the idea of *interpersonal cause-and-effect*. I acted according to my *Internal Working Model*. So I didn’t pay much attention to what you might have wanted. I paid attention to meeting my needs. I paid attention to what you might do.

[One step along the circle.] Second, when you call me out, I think that means the other shoe is going to drop. We both are walking on eggshells and here we are escalating again. Either you are ready to be done with me or you are going to challenge the way I meet my needs. That puts me in danger either way. I’m instantly triggered. I’m scared. I’m nearly at *limbic hijack*. Will you lose control?

Third, I swear or fib or yell or say something to hurt you because you have scared and hurt me. I want you to stop. By now, I stress you as much as you stress me -- but I see it entirely as your doing. I’m ashamed of me. You're ashamed of you and you are ashamed of me. The household epidemic of helplessness and tension has overwhelmed us once again.

[One step along the circle.] Fourth, you feel something I barely understand. Disrespected. Crossing your boundaries. Disappointed in me. Those are words that have little meaning.

[One step.] It all translates into *abandonment*.

[One step.] Fifth, then you say “We’ll send you to -- fill in the blank – the hospital, detention,

Children’s Court, protective service, police, adoption agency. Why did we adopt you?” See, you are proving how rejectable I am. When you *parent-by-rejection*, you think I will fall into line. Yet, you just confirmed no one wants me. So how could I comply with anything *you* want? So I have to take care of myself.

You might even have the wherewithall to say you chose me or you wanted me. Hard to believe right now.

You may think your intentions matter. You intended to keep me safe. You intended to teach me about behavior. You didn't intend to hurt me. You only wanted to _____. Remember, I don't read the inside of people all that well, if at all. Your intentions are not what I see. I see my Inner Working Model and what it tells me you mean.

[One step.] Sixth, I may look blank. I may run out of the room shouting. I may say “I hate you.” After all, you just confirmed my worst nightmare about myself and my life. Maybe I throw something or knock something over. I have to isolate myself from this misery and go be alone. Or cause you pain in return.



[One step.] Seventh, *my limbic explosion causes you to become as dys-regulated as I am!* Instead of rising to a higher quality of parenting, you come down to my level instead. You may shout or repeat some threat or say, “That’s it. The door is coming off your room.” Or “No cell phone for a month.” Your impulsive reactions terrify me. I must be no good.

Let me tell you about ESCALATION. If I say, "I hate you." Then you can take it up a notch. That's *Escalation*. You could take it down a notch. That's *De-Escalation*. So, you may say, impulsively, "That's it. You're grounded." Or "That's it, no screen time for a month." Or "You never loved me. You are loathsome." Or "I'm calling the police." All those are Escalation.

If you say, "Honey, I know you are upset. Let's sit together until you feel calmer." Or "Let's keep you safe until you can breathe and talk." That is de-escalation. You know you are escalating if you get really mad. Or if you start a statement with "You always" or "You never" or you are going to criticize me. You know you are de-escalating if you take a breath and become calmer and try to

say something loving or something in a calm voice.

[One step.] Eighth, I have a hard time stopping to apologize. After all, I have lost any *self-regulation* over my behavior. Remember, self-regulation over the limbic system is learned in the first year or two as a result of caregivers responding with loving connection to a baby's needs. I didn't have that. So when I become *dys-regulated*, I don't know how to come back.

[One step.] Ninth, you are dys-regulated, too. You are not saying how you want me to be safe and you accept me – not that I would believe the words, but your calmness and your self-control would have been a little reassuring for me. No, you are threatening and punishing. That confirms my lack of value, helplessness, hopelessness, inner badness, and insecurity.

[Completing the transit of the circle, the therapist concludes.] Tenth, in the end of this hundredth argument, you confirmed your low opinion of me and I confirmed my low opinion of me. We joined to repeat the confirmation of my tenuous status in the world. We did not *empathically attune* and increase the possibilities of attachment.

Plus, you think it's my fault this all happens. Did you have no awareness of how dysregulated *you* were? How upset -- limbic hijack -- for you? How impulsive? How much we react to one another? How much our arguments are an unending circle?

VII - Permanent Understanding of the World

Here is all that I have re-created with you and confirmed in my heart and mind and body. That's what highly *traumatized* people do. They *re-experience the trauma*. **But when the trauma takes place early in life, they re-live it through their relationships. Their body knows and their unconscious knows, and they react at those levels rather than in words and explanations.** I have to repeat that. **I am the embodiment of my trauma.** It is not merely what happened to me; *it is now me*. I re-live it every day even if that day nothing serious happens.

A. Deeply held and deeply felt beliefs about myself and my world.

SCHEMA OF ABANDONMENT

Core emotional reaction to events with a *felt sense* of immediate or impending total rejection. The experience that adults are unreliable. They are emotionally and

interpersonally unstable. I am not protected. Rather, I will be thrown away.

SCHEMA OF MISTRUST AND ABUSE

Believing deeply I will be harmed, hurt, cheated, and used in the way I was when I was neglected -- physically and emotionally.

SCHEMA OF EMOTIONAL DEPRIVATION

Knowing the hunger in my body and soul means I was and will be bereft of emotional satisfaction and acceptance, warmth, nurturance, attunement, and safety. I may expect to be treated unequally and unfairly. My behavior may lead to being treated differently, which confirms mistrust and fear of abandonment.

SCHEMA OF DEFECTIVENESS

I am shameful, deficient, unwanted, inadequate, bad, rotten to the core, and, therefore, unlovable. So, I am *hyper-vigilant* for rejection or, worse, abandonment. Blaming me equals rejection. Shaming me equals rejection. Guilting me equals rejection. Saying I am lying, stealing, or manipulating equals rejection. Pointing out my defects deflates me; so I cannot hear punishment or understand what you want from me.

SCHEMA OF SOCIAL ISOLATION

I often experience myself like an electron off in space, all alone, disconnected from all others. Feeling truly alone is one of the most painful of all feelings a human being can have. It's not the sense of loneliness you understand or missing someone; but something much deeper and more intense.

SCHEMA OF INSUFFICIENT SELF-CONTROL

I have not gained or have not been able to access the *self-control, frustration tolerance, and acceptance of uncertainty* necessary to restrain my emotions and impulses from going over-board in a limbic storm.

B. BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

Here are some crucial problems in my brain. With forming new attachments, these can be repaired.

- Over-development of fear circuitry in the limbic system, especially the amygdala

- Under-development of the openness to new emotional learning in the hippocampus
 - Under-development of frontal cerebral centers for planning, thinking ahead, attention, cause-and-effect thinking, and inhibition of impulses
 - Under-development of mirror neurons needed to understand and feel for others
 - Under-development of gray matter in the visual association area, the connections between cells necessary for a wider, more flexible array of responses
-

So that is where we are and why we are here. You had great intentions for your selves, your family, and for how you could make a better life for me. But you were not equipped to overcome how poorly equipped I am for that life.

REPAIRS AND IMPROVEMENTS. **There is a way to get there.** Somewhere in me is the lingering hope you will find the way. What do I need? I need *empathic attunement*, total *acceptance*. I need *well-regulated calm parents*, even when I am so difficult. I need help with regulating myself. I need not just physical nurturing, but, more important, consistent emotional nurturing over a long time. I need the attunement of others to my inner feelings. Even when my most frightening schemas are activated, stay cool. Keep accepting me. Don't get triggered. It's not about "consequences," which I understand in a totally different way than you do. But it is all about being very sensitive to my inner life and my anxieties. It will take time – months or years -- and those unusual therapists who understand me.



Watch for glimmers of connection and strengthen those.

YOUR ATTACHMENT HISTORY. It is likely that your own history of attachments includes some problems. This is so important. Oh, and this includes therapists. They can get dis-regulated too. If you grew up with secure attachment, maybe you will be able to stay accepting, calm, and understanding towards me. If your own history of attachments was fraught with any problems, that will affect how you perceive me and behave towards me. When I behave like a wounded person who cannot attach, it brings out any insecurity my parents may feel about their own attachments. Not sure you are okay and loved? Or special and wanted? Or competent and adequate? Or powerful and

capable? Trying to raise me will bring out your attachment anxieties and insecurities. Then you will react to that and not at your best!

For example, if you are insecure about your attachments, my behavior will be more devastating to you and you may be depressed about it or get angry. If your way is to doubt yourself and pull away from people, then you will pull away from me as well. Knowing your own history is so important. *I hope you go over it with your therapist so you are better able to be stable and consistent.*

I heard you got me because you wanted to give to me and love me. You may want to love me so very much. You want me to show love back. I can't let myself feel it. Not yet. So you probably will feel rejected, wounded, hurt. Forlorn, enraged, or out of control. You never expect this.

You did not expect your own parents and friends to judge you as inadequate parents. Or that the methods that work for other kids will only make things worse with me. Especially what you call "discipline" that I call rejection. A therapist named Beth once said about us, "It feels like nothing parents do has ever bridged the chasm between parents and the child. Despite years and years of dedication -- early intervention programs, diverse therapies, attachment seminars, IEP meetings, psychiatric consultations, and nights spent praying at the foot of their child's bed -- they do not know for sure if this trauma-informed approach will ever work and how their impaired child will live on." Are you feeling like that?

I'm told this. Good parents are always simultaneously conscious of their child of **now**, their child who has been **up to now**, and their vision of **how the child needs to be in order** to master the world when the child is grown up. I guess I don't inspire your confidence about how I will grow up to be an independent person, well educated, a good partner to someone, a good parent myself --and certainly not too early in life. How I might have good friends, be able to manage money, have skills for succeeding in the workplace, and be happy. I must frustrate you and frighten you about all this. I do sense your lack of faith in me and the lack of faith in yourself that I must inspire.

It is also possible the therapist's history of attachments includes some problems. I hope the therapist knows how his or her own history affects how our relationship unfolds.

CAN I GIVE YOU A BIT MORE ADVICE. Keep me physically safe. Keep everyone in the family safe. That's first. I may not like it! Remove the objects I might misuse and then there will be less opportunity to discipline me. Alarming my door and the outer doors can be a good idea. It may be

others in the family need locked doors too or wedges on the inside of doors. Lock up chemicals and drugs and sharp things. That locking cabinet in the kitchen, that could be helpful. One in the garage, also helpful. No guns in the house. If I can't get at anything dangerous, I can't hurt myself or anyone else.

Keep me, all of us, emotionally safe. I get that parenting means providing food and a place to live, and routines and rules, all wrapped within relationships. That's your job. I figured out that my behaviors are not what you expected and don't fit some of those rules and throw you off from being the parent you want to be.



I need to see the other kids receive the same consequences as I do. Never be impulsive. Plan your actions ahead of time. Decide which behaviors need a comment and don't comment on everything. That will just cause conflicts. Decide on what you will do -- that means the parents collectively -- so you can stick to that and not get triggered emotionally. Know how far you are going to do and don't go into the zone of mistreatment or abuse. Don't isolate our family; you need others and their help. Script what you are going to do so you can do as you planned out.

Oh, the plan should not be for harsh the punishment will be. You learned by now that won't help. The plan should be for a safe place to which I can retreat. Or a method for calming down followed by joining in a positive activity like popcorn night with a video or a game.

Pick your battles. Not every action requires correction and improvement now. Instruction, asking "why," contests of wills, giving "consequences" as in punishments -- all these could cause battles. Much better is to catch me doing something that's how you want it or just right and highlight that and reinforce my appropriate behavior. "You put your dishes by the sink and you did what I asked. That's two high fives. And when you do that at the next meal, it's three high fives and extra screen time tonight. Well done." Nope, remember when you said, "It's about time you put your dishes by the sink." Or this one, "What got into you today? You never do that."

No empty threats. It didn't take me long to understand *parenting-by-threats*. "I'll call the police." If you say you will do something, you have to follow through. Otherwise two things will happen. I won't believe your promises. I won't care about the threat and will react to the tone, to the message of rejection and shaming. Only say what you are going to do and do it.

Yes, we all tend to think correction, criticism, and consequences shape behavior. The big C's do not work for me. Actually, they don't work much at all without catching people behaving correctly, courtesy, compliments, and commendations. Those are what tells us the roadmap for behavior and shape better responses. The big C's don't. They may stop something, but they don't build anything.

This one is not about me. In any household with an impaired child or one with disabilities, the one may need a disproportionate amount of parents' focus, time, and effort. The other kids are watching and needing. So, they should see you at your best, as the kind of parent you want all of us to grow up to be! Think about that. If you put your energy into disciplining me and we escalate, the other may disengage or they may ally with one of us; those are two unwelcome outcomes. They are watching and learning from your behavior. Even when I don't learn from consequences, the other will accept consequences.

Respond to my actions with words and especially words that tell me you know me. You know my schemas. You know where I went in my head. You know my trauma is activated. "You are angry because you got scared." "You thought you were going to be hurt." "You were afraid it would be unfair and you would miss out."

Keep a diary. I am not above controlling my environment by threatening you with an abuse report or telling my teacher you hit me. When you call the police, they will question your actions as the adult here. If you take me to the hospital, they will need specifics. So will the therapist. Any of these people will ask what you did.

This presentation is the work of Don Rosenberg, with editorial input from psychotherapists Kim Greenwald, Samantha Pierce, Carol Trout, and Elizabeth Williams, all of the staff of Shorehaven Behavioral Health, Inc, Brown Deer, Wisconsin, based in part upon the teachings on attachment of Mary Hess, PhD, and influenced by John Bowlby's attachment theory and the schema therapy of Jeffrey Young, PhD which you will recognize whenever the word *schema* is used in the presentation. We use an approach that is based upon attunement and building positive attachment. © 2018, 2020