

Working with Relational Trauma: Dealing with Disorganised Attachment online training



by Carolyn Spring



Session Summaries | Reflection Questions | References | Notes

Session summary – what will you learn?

- Exploring via personal narrative the impact of relational trauma and in particular disorganised attachment
- Exploring the limitations of the medical model of mental illness as a framework for emotional distress
- Introducing the importance of relational models of psychotherapy for healing relational wounds
- Exploring the phenomenological experience of relational difficulties resulting from attachment trauma

Reflection Questions

1. In your experience, at what point or in what way does someone 'with a problem' become a 'problem person'?
2. What sense have you made so far of your own relational history? – are you burglar or burgled, bystander or police, or do you play some other role?
3. In what ways have you ever left the front door of your life open? If it's still open now, how could you begin to close it?

Overall Learning Reflection from this session

Session summary – what will you learn?

- Introducing the development of attachment theory by John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth and Mary Main
- Understanding attachment in the context of safety and threat and its connection therefore to trauma
- Exploring the three subsets of early life attachment behaviour identified by Bowlby and how these correlate to later adult behaviours

Reflection Questions

1. Who are your attachment figures?

2. What are your attachment behaviours?

3. How do you express proximity-seeking, secure base and safe haven behaviours?

Overall Learning Reflection from this session

Session summary – what will you learn?

- Exploring the development of attachment theory from literal proximity to perceived attunement via internal working models
- Exploring the impact of mismatches between dyadic attachment styles
- Understanding the development of attachment styles as evidenced by Mary Ainsworth's 'Strange Situation' and the resulting core beliefs and presentations which develop from these

Reflection Questions

1. Do you feel comfortable with people expressing their emotions? Do you feel comfortable expressing yours?
2. To what extent could 'insecure-ambivalent' be interpreted as attention-seeking?
3. How can you encourage insecure-avoidants to speak up about their feelings?

Overall Learning Reflection from this session

Session summary – what will you learn?

- Exploring the aetiology of disorganised attachment as a relationship-specific phenomenon
- Exploring Liotti's theory that disorganised attachment, trauma and dissociation are intertwined
- Exploring disorganised attachment as 'fear without solution'
- Exploring how attachment styles result in specific strategic approaches to relationships
- Introducing the concept of the therapist as a trigger of disorganised attachment behaviours and the clinical impact of this

Reflection Questions

Consider the attachment styles table on the next two pages, check that you have made sense of it and consider how it applies to you / your clients.

Overall Learning Reflection from this session

SECURE

'I just need to ask for help to get my mother to stay close.'

BEHAVIOUR IN THE STRANGE SITUATION

- Mostly able to explore and play, using the mother as a secure base
- Varying degrees of wariness about the stranger
- Varying degrees of distress when mother left the room
- Positive reunion with the mother
- Easily comforted by the mother and seeks physical contact with her
- Returned quickly to play

CHILD

- Balanced in attachment and exploration
- Able to experience and express negative emotions
- Has confidence in their capacity to manage distress (either on their own or by seeking help)
- Able to behave flexibly and openly with relationship
- In tune with own feelings and thoughts
- Accurate and honest communication
- Resilient

MOTHER

- Sensitive
- Loving
- Responsive
- Attuned
- Consistent
- Willing to repair a ruptured relationship

CORE BELIEF ABOUT SELF

- I am competent
- I am lovable
- My needs are important
- My feelings are important

CORE BELIEF ABOUT MOTHER

- She will be unconditionally available and responsive at times of need

INSECURE-AMBIVALENT

'If I scream for attention, I can get my mother to stay close.'

BEHAVIOUR IN THE STRANGE SITUATION

- Sometimes had difficulty using the mother as a secure base to explore and play
- Varying degrees of wariness about the stranger
- Varying degrees of distress when mother left the room
- Difficult reunion with the mother
- Sometimes their distress increased upon reunion
- Moved towards the mother, wanting to be picked up, but then started to struggle, kick, hit or flail
- Many continued to be distressed despite mother's attempts to soothe: resistant and angry

CHILD

- Is uncertain of the link between their behaviour and the parent's response – seems arbitrary
- Increases the 'volume' of their distress in order to get attention, including crying, fretting, whining, fussing, being provocative, fractious or demanding
- Desires a response from the parent but is also angry at the parent for being unreliable
- Does not trust the parent to continue to give attention when it is won, and so resists being soothed and comforted
- Preoccupied and hypersensitive to other people's emotional availability and interest
- Finds it difficult to play and explore

- Finds it difficult to be left alone
- Coercive and controlling towards others in order to get attention, including being angry, threatening, needy and seductive
- Anxious need to feel loved and noticed

MOTHER

- Inconsistent
- Preoccupied with own needs and uncertainties
- Fears being ignored and emotionally abandoned
- Anxious need for reassurance from others
- Demanding in relationships
- Cares more about being loved by the child than the child feeling loved
- Poor at mirroring the child's feelings – slow to notice distress

CORE BELIEF ABOUT SELF

- I have no confidence in my ability to affect the behaviour of others – people only notice me when I'm shouting or screaming for attention

CORE BELIEF ABOUT MOTHER

- She is inconsistent and unpredictable
- Her needs are more important than mine

INSECURE-AVOIDANT

'If I hide my emotions and my needs, I can get my mother to stay close.'

BEHAVIOUR IN THE STRANGE SITUATION

- Mostly able to explore and play, using the mother as a secure base, although sometimes more independent than the secure babies
- Varying degrees of wariness about the stranger, although possibly more receptive towards her than the other groups
- Varying degrees of distress when mother leaves the room
- Reunion appears superficially to be positive, but some striking aspects:
 - Not particularly passionate
 - Returned quickly to play
 - Often started to move towards the mother upon reunion, and let out a cry
 - But then DOESN'T seek to be picked up
 - Looked away from mother towards toys or the stranger
 - Upon the second reunion, didn't move towards mother at all
 - Seemed blasé and unconcerned about the whole thing

CHILD

- Downplays and inhibits their feelings of need
- Over-regulates their emotions

- Consistently omits negative feelings from their experience
- Deactivates their attachment needs in order to stay close
- Tends to be compliant in the presence of the carer
- Does not know how to elicit care and protection

MOTHER

- Copes with attachment needs from child by distancing emotionally and/or physically
- Imposes on child their own views of how 'good' children should behave
- Rejects child when child is emotional or needy; accepts child when they are being independent, self-contained and self-sufficient
- Predictably and consistently rejecting

CORE BELIEF ABOUT SELF

- I can look after myself and don't need anyone else's help
- I am independent and strong

CORE BELIEF ABOUT MOTHER

- She will reject me if I show my feelings or need anything from her

DISORGANISED

'There's nothing I can do to get my mother to stay close.'

BEHAVIOUR IN THE STRANGE SITUATION

- Principal behaviour fell into one of the other categories
- Showed 10-30 seconds of 'inexplicable, contradictory or bizarre behaviour', e.g.
 - Approached the mother backwards
 - Froze in place
 - Collapsed to the floor
 - Fell into a dazed, trance-like state
 - Put hand up to mouth in a kind of frozen scream

CHILD

- Left feeling distressed for long periods of time
- Attachment behaviour goes unterminated
- Becomes emotionally hyper-aroused and then dissociates
- Lacks a coherent sense of self
- Cannot manage emotional arousal in him/herself or others
- Experiences intense fear and shame

MOTHER

- Abusive, hostile
- Helpless, lost, panicky
- Has unresolved trauma
- Unable to empathise with the needs and distress of her children

- Distressed by the child's distress, often triggering a dissociative state
- Unpredictable: invites approach and then avoids
- Fails to show any response or offer comfort when child is distressed
- Becomes disoriented/dissociative when child shows attachment behaviours
- Negative-intrusive behaviours such as mocking a distressed child
- Exhibits role-confusion, e.g. requires comfort and protection from the child or speaks to the child seductively
- Refuses physical or eye contact after a distressing separation

CORE BELIEF ABOUT SELF

- I am the cause of my mother's fear
- I am shameful and worthless
- There is nothing I can do: collapse of strategy for dealing with attachment needs

CORE BELIEF ABOUT MOTHER

- She is 'frightened and frightening'
- She is abusive and hostile
- She is helpless

*Collapse of strategy:
'fright without solution'
(Main and Hesse, 1992)*

Session summary – what will you learn?

→ Exploring the clinical implications of boundaries via narrative and metaphor.

Reflection Questions

1. Whose garden do you spend most time tending?
2. Which aspects of your garden do you feel most out of control in?
3. Which aspects of gardening do you feel you need to work on?

Overall Learning Reflection from this session

Session summary – what will you learn?

- Exploring the role and presentation of conflict in relational trauma
- Exploring the link between secure attachment and positive conflict resolution, and the presentation of conflict within insecure and disorganised attachment styles
- Exploring the difference between anger and rage from an attachment perspective
- Exploring via personal case study the challenges of conflict and boundary-enforcing in clinical session.
- Exploring the research on the role of self-disclosure and conflict management in complaints against therapists

Reflection Questions

1. How do you tend to respond when you're angry?
2. How comfortable would you feel in admitting your anger to your client/ therapist?
3. What might some of the pitfalls be of expressing anger in the therapy room?

Overall Learning Reflection from this session

Session summary – what will you learn?

- Exploring the neurobiological development of affect regulation from infancy onwards and the role of experience in the acquisition of self-regulatory neural networks
- Exploring the concept that attachment styles are not value-based but survival-driven
- Exploring how attachment drives differing perceptions of the task/relationship balance and the potential for conflict in therapist/client dyads
- Exploring hemispheric differences in the brains of people with different attachment styles and the implications of this for developing secure attachment

Reflection Questions

1. Do you tend to see blues more (focus on the task)? Or do you tend to see greens more (focus on the relationship)?
2. Are you more left-brain or right-brain?
3. Are there significant differences between you and your therapist / client / partner?

Overall Learning Reflection from this session

Session summary – what will you learn?

- Exploring the persistence of attachment style across the lifespan via Mary Main's 'Adult Attachment Interview' and the implications of this for developing 'earned secure attachment'
- Exploring the phenomenological presentation of adult attachment styles
- Exploring the predictive power of early life attachment styles on future generations
- Exploring the role of the 'stance of the self towards experience' in rewiring attachment styles
- Introducing a simple matrix delineating attachment-related self/other concepts

Reflection Questions

1. Thinking about the adult attachment interview, what is your usual 'style of discourse'? What about your client/ partner/ friend? What does that say about your attachment?
2. Do you believe that attachment history is not attachment destiny? What is your 'stance towards the self' for major things that have happened in your life?
3. What do you think to the attachment matrix? Can you identify the degree to which you are positive / negative towards yourself / others?

Overall Learning Reflection from this session

Session summary – what will you learn?

- Exploring the role of affect regulation and mentalising in building earned secure attachment, and the outworking of this in clinical practice
- Exploring clinical goal setting, the role of traumatic transferences, and boundary infractions.
- Exploring the inefficacy of reassurance as therapeutic technique in rewiring attachment patterning
- Exploring the relative merits and risks of strong/soft boundaries in clients with different attachment presentations
- Exploring the presentation of 'controlling-caregiving' and 'controlling-coercive' behaviours in clients with disorganised attachment

Reflection Questions

1. What are your goals for the therapy or support you provide? What are the clients' goals?
2. Are you generally speaking a 'firm' boundary person or a 'soft' boundary person? Are your boundaries different with different clients?
3. How do you manage issues around control, including 'controlling-caregiving'?

Overall Learning Reflection from this session

Session summary – what will you learn?

- Exploring how to replicate the dynamics of secure attachment through ‘marked and contingent’ mirroring.
- Exploring how attachment styles influence ‘markedness’ and ‘contingency’ in non-verbal mirroring

Reflection Questions

1. To what extent do you feel comfortable tuning into non-verbal communication?
2. How might your theoretical background (e.g. CBT, person-centred, psychodynamic) impact the degree to which your mirroring is ‘marked’ and ‘contingent’?
3. How did the ‘still face experiment’ make you feel?

Overall Learning Reflection from this session

Session summary – what will you learn?

- Exploring skills for affect regulation in an attachment-sensitive way (thinking versus feeling and bi-hemispheric)
- Exploring Fonagy's concept of 'psychic equivalence' and the relevance of this for insecure-ambivalent clients
- Exploring how to promote mentalising in place of reassurance-seeking for insecure-ambivalent clients
- Exploring how to encourage interactive re-regulation with insecure-avoidant clients
- Exploring a model of articulating affect based on sensations, thoughts and impulses
- Exploring the use of physical proximity to escalate or de-escalate attachment bids for connection
- Exploring how to adjust language to encourage emotional expression from insecure-avoidant clients
- Exploring the presentation of conflicted approach/avoid in disorganised attachment
- Exploring how to work compassionately but non-collusively with highly triggered dissociative clients

Reflection Questions

Take some time to look at page 15 ('Insecure Ambivalent -v- Insecure Avoidant') and think about:

1. How to turn the volume down for ambivalents
2. How to turn the volume up for avoidants
3. What some of the pitfalls and aims are for working with different attachment styles

Overall Learning Reflection from this session

	<i>Insecure-Ambivalent</i>	<i>Insecure-Avoidant</i>
Issue	Too much feeling Too little thinking	Too little feeling Too much thinking
	Volume on emotions too high	Volume on emotions too low
	Too little self-reliance Too much reliance on others	Too much self-reliance Too little reliance on others
	Too much emotion Too little container	Too little emotion Too much container
Main message needed from therapist	“I hear you” “I am not overwhelmed and will not be controlled by your loud emotions”	“It’s okay for you to speak up” “I will not reject you for feeling or having needs”
Therapist pitfalls	Offers too much and cannot maintain, so withdraws and is inconsistent	Offers too little and the therapy stays within rigid, intellectualised constraints
	Too much self-disclosure Gets in the way of the client rather than ensuring that they are heard	Too little self-disclosure Puts the focus shamefully on the client rather than mirroring emotions that struggle to be felt
	Colludes in responding to high-volume cries for help	Colludes in ignoring feelings and needs
	Unhelpfully models emotional expression	Unhelpfully models emotional control
	Emotionally dominates in the session	Emotions are suppressed or deflected in the session
	Relational proximity is too close: enmeshment Step back	Relational proximity is too distant: avoidance Step forward
Main aim	Build appropriate self-reliance	Build appropriate reliance on others
	Down-regulate emotional expression	Up-regulate emotional expression
Boundaries	Keep them firm	Keep them soft

Session summary – what will you learn?

- Exploring the phenomenological experience in disorganised attachment of a caregiver who is 'frightened and frightening'.
- Exploring the representation of disorganised attachment as multiple models of self/other.
- Exploring the opportunities and limits of 'model-disconfirming behaviour'.
- Exploring the phenomenological experience of aloneness and loneliness in clients with relational trauma and how to work sensitively with this.

Overall Learning Reflection from this session and the course as a whole

SESSIONS 1-3

- John Briere: www.johnbriere.com
- Child Trauma Academy: www.childtrauma.org
- John Briere – quoted in *Rebuilding Shattered Lives* by James A Chu: <https://amzn.to/2SlrxXA>
- *Treatment of Complex Trauma* by Christine Courtois & Julian A Ford: <https://amzn.to/2PCWSIo>
- International Attachment Network: www.ian-attachment.org.uk
- *A Secure Base* by John Bowlby: <https://amzn.to/2PCYRwk>
- *John Bowlby and Attachment Theory* by Jeremy Holmes: <https://amzn.to/2zXIG7w>
- *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds* by John Bowlby: <https://amzn.to/2SHkE7E>
- *Attachment (Attachment and Loss Volume 1)* by John Bowlby: <https://amzn.to/2zU2Z5l>
- *Separation, Anxiety and Attachment (Attachment and Loss Volume 2)* by John Bowlby: <https://amzn.to/2SLwDkV>
- *Loss, Sadness and Depression (Attachment and Loss Volume 3)* by John Bowlby: <https://amzn.to/2zXVQBz>
- *Affect Regulation and Disorders of the Self* by Allan Schore: <https://amzn.to/2C78bVv>
- *The Origins of Attachment Theory: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth* by Inge Bretherton: http://www.psychology.sunysb.edu/attachment/online/inge_origins.pdf
- Powerpoint Slides about the Strange Situation by Everett Waters: http://www.psychology.sunysb.edu/attachment/video_contents/Strange_Situation_Slides_c2012_EWATERS.pdf
- Eight Minute Overview of the Strange Situation (audio): http://www.psychology.sunysb.edu/attachment/video_contents/STRANGESITUATION.mp4
- Interview with Sir Richard Bowlby (son of John Bowlby) (video): http://www.psychology.sunysb.edu/attachment/video_contents/Richard_Bowlby_Interview.mp4

SESSIONS 4-6

- *Trauma, Dissociation, and Disorganised Attachment: Three Strands of a Single Braid* by Giovanni Liotti: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232444458_Trauma_Dissociation_and_Disorganized_Attachment_Three_Strands_of_a_Single_Braid
- *Understanding Disorganised Attachment: Theory and Practice for Working with Children and Adults* by David Shemmings: <https://amzn.to/3xOjEnX>
- *The Playground Study*. There have been a number of these over the years. Here's one example: <https://www.asla.org/awards/2006/studentawards/282.html>
- *Countertransference and the Treatment of Trauma* by Constance Dalenberg: <https://amzn.to/3nTuDb7>
- *Treating Complex Traumatic Stress Disorders in Adults* by Christine Courtois & Julian A Ford (editors): <https://amzn.to/2PXqpRb>
- *Treatment of Complex Trauma: A Sequenced, Relationship-Based Approach* by Christine Courtois & Julian A Ford: <https://amzn.to/2RuKdh6>

SESSIONS 6-10

- *The Science of Infant Brain Development: Insights on the Nature/Nurture Debate* by N R Ahlander, World Family Policy Forum: 72-82 (2002)
- *Becoming Attached* by Robert Karen: <https://amzn.to/3ersKiF>
- *Adult Attachment Interview Protocol* by George, Caplan & Main (1985):
http://www.psychology.sunysb.edu/attachment/measures/content/aai_interview.pdf
- *Boundary Modifications in the Treatment of People with Dissociative Disorders: A Pilot Study* by Adah Sachs:
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15299732.2012.714677>
- *Affect Regulation, Mentalization and the Development of the Self* by Peter Fonagy: <https://amzn.to/3uutt8h>

Info and links

‘Working with Relational Trauma: Dealing with Disorganised Attachment’ online training by Carolyn Spring

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