**Internal Working Model – Jane Mitchell**

Our internal working model is the template through which we view ourselves, others and the world in general. To understand the way in which this is developed we need to go back to the basics of a baby’s first experiences, remembering that these first experiences are responsible for activating neuronal pathways and making connections in the cortex. These relationally mediated pathways affect our early emotional, social, physical and cognitive areas as we play with and stimulate the development of our child.

**Healthy Attachment Cycle**

1. The child experiences discomfort – They are cold, wet, lonely, hungry, bored or scared. (The world is, after all, a big unfamiliar place which is confusingly full of multiple sensory stimuli)
2. The child expresses their discomfort in the only way they can and cries. For the child, they are expressing a survival need which they are unable to fulfil for themselves. Human babies are completely vulnerable and dependant at birth. Their life depends on their caregivers and so discomfort is perceived by their brain as a threat to their existence.
3. The caregiver responds to the baby’s distress. The first thing that happens is that the child is picked up and calmed by the co-regulation, physical contact and soothing noises of the caregiver. This is a very empathic response.
4. The caregiver identifies what the issue is, and feeds/changes/cuddles/plays with the baby. Both baby and caregiver experience pleasure in their interaction whether calming or relaxing and this is conveyed by tone of voice, eye contact, facial expression etc.
5. The baby returns to a resting state and processes (unconsciously). A neurological pathway is established with the prefrontal cortex which records this interaction and forms part of the baby’s emerging knowledge and understanding of their own unique experience of the world.

This child is having a wonderful experience of being loved, and being found interesting, funny, clever – their parents are supporting their cognitive development by talking to them (literacy, communications) and by being consistent and having routines (patterns, cause and effect, numeracy; they are supporting their emotional development by co-regulating and being emotionally available; their social development by gradually increasing their exposure to other member of the family and friends; and physically by helping them to exercise their limbs and encouraging them to reach for objects. Children at this stage process in a sensory way, and this will continue to happen until they develop a vocabulary to describe what they see and feel. Experiences are held “in the body” and form the basis of the child’s early responses. It is easy to see how this early experience in which parents are generally parenting in a “good enough” way leads to a very positive self image and working model for the child.

(I use the term “good enough” because we all make mistakes. In developmental terms this is quite useful, leading to resilient relationships that can withstand disruption)

**Deficient or Unhealthy Attachment Cycle**

1. The child experiences discomfort – They are cold, wet, lonely, hungry, bored or scared. (The world is, after all, a big unfamiliar place which is confusingly full of multiple sensory stimuli)
2. The child expresses their discomfort in the only way they can and cries. For the child, they are expressing a survival need which they are unable to fulfil for themselves. Human babies are completely vulnerable and dependant at birth. Their life depends on their caregivers and so discomfort is perceived by their brain as a threat to their existence.
3. Caregiver fails to soothe and co-regulate, or shows angry response, or gives inconsistent response, leading to stress, confusion and fear for the baby.
4. Needs are not met, are inconsistently met, or are inadequately met. Baby does not have the wonderful experience of joyfulness in their caregivers presence, and does not have that experience mirrored back to them, or this is inconsistent leading to stress and anxiety.
5. Baby’s experience is inconsistent and is frequently stressful.
6. Processing occurs and neurological pathways established which again informs the baby’s emerging sense of themselves, adults and the world.

This child is having his brain built too. The neurological connections are happening. But the result is different. This child cannot trust, has to fight for survival and internalises a model that they are very bad indeed – unloveable and worthless. As for adults, they are unpredictable and unreliable at best, or actively hurt you at worst, confirming your ideas that you deserve nothing better. This idea is so strong, that being open to other experiences feels uncomfortable and unsafe. You know its not true, and you fall quickly into your old patterns of behaviour and distrust. This is much worse when you have just had a positive experience.

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