

**IMPROVING TREATMENT EFFECTIVENESS WITH ATTACHMENT THEORY:**

*GUIDE THERAPY WITH ATTACHMENT THEORY AND COMPASSIONATE SELF-AWARENESS*

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**SOCIETY FOR THE EXPLORATION OF PSYCHOTHERAPY INTEGRATION:**

**SEPI**

*An international organization dedicated to promoting the development of psychotherapies that integrate theoretical orientations and clinical practices; and also to the creating greater collaboration between practitioners and researchers*

**Learn more: [sepiweb.org](http://sepiweb.org)**

2

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**ATTACHMENT THEORY**  
A REVIEW

**Proximity:**  
Seeking nearness of an attachment figure

**Safe Haven:**  
Looking for protection and comfort when threatened

**Secure Base:**  
Feeling supported in freely exploring interests and the world



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## ATTACHMENT THEORY A REVIEW

### Affect Regulation:

- Explains our emotional engagement in relationships (with self & others)
- Explains how we manage threats and distress.

### Collaborative communication:

- Co-created communication between parent and child
- Helps regulate emotions

### Mental Representations:

- Mental representation of an attachment figure who is (relatively) consistently emotionally available allows people to feel safe and secure even when far from that figure.
- Enable sense of proximity even at a geographic distance

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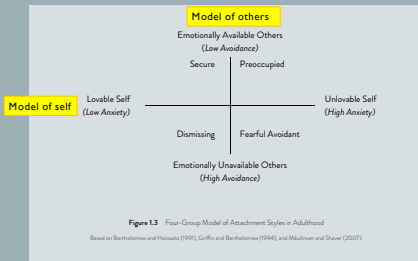
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4

## ATTACHMENT STYLES



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## CULTURE AND ATTACHMENT

(Agishtein & Brumbaugh, 2013)

- ◆ Biologically-based behavioral system
- ◆ Cross-culture studies of adult attachment show:  
58% secure, 24% avoidant, 18% anxious
- Attachment style distribution varied based on ethnicities and region.
- ◆ Other research: Inconsistent findings for corr. of ethnicity & attachment
- Identification with a culture was positively associated with secure attachment
- Anxiety and avoidance were negatively correlated with acculturation

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ATTACHMENT STYLE & PSYCHOPATHOLOGY

Factor analyses have found support for a single "p factor" that underlies most psychopathology for children & adults (including personality disorders)

Attachment insecurities are highly correlated with many pathologies, and symptoms of diagnoses, and ineffective coping. They are not usually the cause of pathology, but create vulnerability to, and exacerbation of, pathology.

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BENEFITS OF INCREASING ATTACHMENT SECURITY IN THERAPY

- Will increase effective coping and resilience, and decrease vulnerability to pathology.
- Can reduce or eliminate pathology
- Reduce treatment resistance/ Increase ability to benefit from treatments targeting specific symptoms

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PATHS TO "EARNED SECURITY"

- **Develop a model of self as being worthy/lovable**
  - Positive relationship with self: Compassionate Self-Awareness
  - Self-Compassion + Self-Awareness
  - Empirical evidence: SC is positively assoc. with secure attachment

- **Develop model of others as being emotionally available**
  - Openness to an emotionally available attachment figure
  - Can be with therapist and/or others in patient's life

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Using Attachment Theory to Create a Frame for Therapy

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UNDERSTANDING THERAPY AS A CONTEXT FOR NURTURING SECURE ATTACHMENT

- Safe Haven: Create therapy as safe zone for sharing distress
- Secure Base: Develop therapeutic relationship as place to explore new way of relating to self & others
- Proximity: Nurture mental representations of healthy attachment figures

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UNDERSTANDING THERAPY AS A CONTEXT FOR NURTURING SECURE ATTACHMENT

- Affect Regulation:
- Insecurely attached are often dysregulated
  - Must monitor and titrate arousal
    - Help person remain within or return to *window of tolerance*

- Collaborative Communication:
- Supports and facilitates affect regulation
  - Discuss mental states, facilitating mentalization
  - Be real as therapist: acknowledge mistakes, imperfections, limitations

12

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SETTING THE STAGE TO INCREASE SELF-AWARENESS

- Encourage curiosity
- Encourage willingness to be uncomfortable
- Encourage willingness to face your fears
- Encourage slowing down to look at reactions

(Motivational interviewing)

13

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Building Awareness In Treatment Through STEAM

All experiences are moderated through the self, including awareness of other.

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BUILDING SELF-AWARENESS

Five Domains of Self-Awareness (STEAM)

- Sensations
- Thoughts
- Emotions
- Actions
- Mentalizing

Therapeutic style: Actively engaged, encouraging patient to consider their own experience and the experience of others.

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### ATTACHMENT AS A CONTEXT FOR TEACHING MENTALIZATION

(Fonagy, Gergely, et al., 2002)

Mentalization is the ability of people to understand their own and others' mental states. It is the ability to:

- "Have mind in mind"
- "Hold heart and mind in heart and mind"

*When done in an emotionally disengaged way, it is "pseudo-mentalizing."*

16

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### ATTACHMENT AS A CONTEXT FOR TEACHING MENTALIZATION

(Fonagy, Gergely, et al., 2002)

Mentalizing enables people to be better at:

- Empathy
- Compassion
- Managing emotions
- Navigating relationships
- Being resilient

17

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### SENSATIONS (STEAM)

- **Anxiously attached:** Reflect on physical experiences rather than merge with them, opening them to empathy and compassion
- **Avoidantly attached:** Increasing awareness of sensations opens them to personal experience, including emotions.
- **Guide patient's focus to the body**
  - ◆ Ask patient to describe and then sit *quietly* with sensations
  - ◆ Ask for patient awareness of emotions that arise from sensations
  - ◆ Ask patient to share experience (sensations, thoughts, emotions) once they grasp them

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### SENSATIONS (STEAM)

**Other ways to use sensations in treatment:**

- Share your visceral reactions, especially with those who are highly detached
- Use proprioception to connect patient with experience
  - ❖ May ask patient to place body in felt position
- Consider learning about body-centered approaches, such as:
  - ❖ Pat Ogden's Sensorimotor Psychotherapy
  - ❖ Peter Levine's Somatic Experiencing

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### THOUGHTS (STEAM)

**Insecure attachment is associated with less flexible thinking.**

- Help patient develop awareness of *and relationship with* thoughts
  - ❖ You are opening them to alternative perspectives, not the "right" one
  - ❖ e.g. What did you tell yourself then? What do you think about those thoughts? Are there other perspectives you could take?
- Encourage patient to reflect on the effects of this thinking
  - ❖ Bodily sensations
  - ❖ Emotions
  - ❖ Actions

(Mindfulness; CBT)

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### EMOTIONS (STEAM)

A major goal of tx with insecurely attached patients is to help people regulate affect and gain sense of safety.

Use psychoeducation about the usefulness of acknowledging, identifying (label), experiencing/tolerating, befriending, and managing emotions in a healthy manner.

- *Emotionally Avoidant*: enlist their cooperation in opening up to emotions
- *Emotionally Overwhelmed*: help them to step back to observe & manage emotions

(Mindfulness; Psychodynamic; Dialectical Behavior Therapy)

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21

## ACTIONS (STEAM)

Actions affect thoughts and emotions related to attachment style:

**Preoccupied:**

- ✦ Set self up for failure in interactions with others
- ✦ Reactions lead to distress (opens therapy to addressing coping skills)

**Dismissing:**

- ✦ Rely solely on self and reject help (increasing treatment resistance)
- ✦ Create isolation/depression by trying to meet self-imposed perfectionistic standards

(Dialectical Behavior Therapy; Acceptance and Commitment Therapy)

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## MENTALIZING (STEAM)

As mindful awareness of domains strengthens, patients develop an understanding of each domain, how domains interact, and themes over time.

- ✦ Create rich narrative to understand self and others
- ✦ Look at mentalizing self and others (*corresponds to developing models of self & others*)
- ✦ Consider how early childhood experiences might relate
- ✦ Nurture self-compassion (*may help to add compassion-centered interventions*)

(Mentalization-Based Therapy)

(Gilbert's Compassion Focused Therapy; Neff & Germer's Mindful Self-Compassion Training)

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## INCREASING AWARENESS: MENTALIZING

**Purpose of interventions is to gain understanding, clarify misunderstandings, & increase mental flexibility:**

- ✦ Be curious about an observation: "It's interesting that you responded to X (your boss promoting you) with X (fear) rather than with X (excitement). I wonder what's going on there?"
- ✦ How did what I just said affect you?
- ✦ Wonder aloud about another person's experience that's motivating behavior
- ✦\*\* What do you think a wise choice would be for you?

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24



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**Gain Self-Awareness through STEAM**

Despite sincere attempts to change, people often repeat personally destructive patterns. When this happens, getting a better understanding of yourself (and others) can help you to get unstuck.

In response to difficult situations or problem behaviors, answer the questions below to enhance your self-awareness in Secure Attachment. It may help to keep an ongoing journal with your answers so that you can then reflect on them. With persistence, you can begin to see your struggles - and how you respond to them - more clearly.

This process may be better changed by itself. However, if you need to respond to your struggles with effective or to be working, you may also need to learn to improve self-compassion. With self-compassion and self-compassion, a combination called self-compassion self-awareness, you will feel more confident - and think more clearly - as you work toward self-improvement.

**Sensations** What do I sense in my body?  
(How may want to use your body from your toes to your head?)

**Thoughts** What am I thinking?  
(Am I thinking clearly?)  
(How your thoughts from the outside or an observer?)

**Emotions** What am I feeling?  
(Identify and "name" your feelings?)

**Actions** How have I been acting/feeling?  
(Notice your reactions to something and positive events.)

**Mentalizing** Do I really "get" what's going on for me and understand what is motivating my actions?  
Do I really "get" what's going on for the other person and understand what is motivating their actions?

Printable PDF on [www.drbecker-phelps.com](http://www.drbecker-phelps.com):  
Access on CSA page from Gain Self-Awareness through STEAM tool OR  
<https://www.drbecker-phelps.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/STEAM-Tool.pdf>

25

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**SUMMARY:  
INCREASING TREATMENT EFFECTIVENESS WITH  
ATTACHMENT THEORY**

By targeting the development of healthy models of self and others found in secure attachment, treatment can reduce symptoms, reduce resistance to change, and increase effectiveness of symptom-focused interventions.

By using attachment theory and the STEAM domains of awareness as frames for viewing therapy, you can integrate various treatment approaches and improve treatment effectiveness.

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