

## Threats to Healthy Adult Relationships: Insecure Attachments in Childhood

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Hello, This is Jose Parappully, Salesian priest and clinical psychologist at Sumedha Centre, Jeolikote, with another edition of Psyche & Soul.

This weekend, we shall reflect on some childhood experiences that threaten our relationships, health and happiness as adults.

Let me begin by telling you about Mr Samuel.

Mr John Samuel has been married for five years and has two children. Although he loves his wife and children, he is not very demonstrative in his affection. He spends very little time with them, preferring to read or watch television. However, he is very possessive of his wife and complains she does not give him enough attention. He is resentful if she spends time with her friends. His wife feels John is too controlling. Naturally the home atmosphere is not very cordial.

Mr Samuel has a job in a bank where he has been working for a few years. At the bank he does not relate much with his colleagues. There have been complaints about the quality of his work too.

Mr Samuel's family history gives some clue as to why he feels the way he does and faces such difficulties. His dad died when John was three years old. His mother became the bread winner of the family, and this took most of her time. Besides, she had also to take care of John's one-and-half-year-old younger sister. She was hassled by many responsibilities and could spare very little time for John. When she could, it was difficult for her to move away from him, because he would cling to her and cry inconsolably, when she tried. Naturally, the young John would develop anxiety and insecurity. If he let her go, he was not sure if she would come back to him.

When children like John grow into adulthood, they are plagued by insecurity which makes them reluctant to be close to others; when they do, they become very clinging. They are scared of losing their friends and partners. Fear of loss makes them quite controlling in their relationships which has the opposite result of making the others distance themselves. These individuals worry that their friends and partners don't love them, even though they themselves are pushing them away.

These children develop what Attachment theory labels **anxious ambivalent** (also known as anxious resistant) insecure attachment. This ambivalent/resistant attachment pattern is promoted by a parent who is available and helpful on some occasions but not on others – that is, by inconsistent and unpredictable parenting. These parents also use threats of abandonment as means of controlling children. Such threats scare the hell out of the children and they live in constant anxiety of the threat being carried out. Naturally, they grow up to be very anxious adults.

The second insecure attachment pattern is labeled **anxious avoidant**. Adults characterized by such an attachment style avoid relationships and act as if they do not need relationships. This pattern is developed by a child who, because of a history of neglect and indifference from parents, is convinced that, when it seeks care and protection, the parent will not respond helpfully. On the contrary, it expects its efforts to be rebuffed. Consequently the child attempts to live its life without seeking love and support from others, and tries to take care of itself and becomes emotionally detached. It denies its attachment needs in order to reduce emotional distress arising from disappointment and develops a high degree of autonomy and competence but suffers from relational inadequacy.

These are the children who grow up to be great achievers, but who are hopeless at relationships. They have always kept their feelings to themselves and so, do not learn how to share their thoughts and feelings with others. Naturally, intimacy becomes a challenge.

Insecure attachment patterns, developed in childhood, continue into adulthood. However, a nurturing environment and frequent encounters with caring and responsive adults later in life can bring about some changes and transform insecure attachment patterns into more secure ones.

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No matter what our childhood attachment experiences have been, we know that we have a God who is always available, responsive and helpful. The prophet Hosea gives us a very soothing and comforting image of God as a loving parent: Let us listen to these words:

“When Israel was a child, I loved him... It was I who taught Ephraim to walk. I took them up in my arms... I led them with chords of compassion, with the bands of love... and I bent down to them and fed them... My compassion grows warm and tender.” (Hosea, 11)

Jesus presents himself as a mother hen holding its chicks under its wings. Gazing at Jerusalem from the Temple Mount, he expresses his sensitive concern: “O, Jerusalem, Jerusalem,...How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” (Lk 13, 37).

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You could now stay for a while with these wonderful biblical images of God as loving father and tender mother. Imagine God as a loving father bending down and picking you up and holding you against his cheeks, or as a loving mother feeding you, or a mother hen holding you warmly under its wings, protecting you.... What do these images evoke in you? What memories come into awareness?

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Stay a while with these feelings and memories evoked and talk to God as a child to its loving parent.

Have a wonderful love-filled weekend. Bye for now.

You can listen a podcast of this post at:

<https://anchor.fm/boscom/episodes/2-4-Psyche--Soul---Threats-to-Healthy-Adult-Relationships-14-eh638h>