

Attachments available

An exploration of the concept of secure bases and how to establish them in adulthood

As an adult, it might be hard to imagine having much in common with your newborn self – utterly helpless and dependent on others to provide and meet your basic needs for survival. But both baby and adult share neurobiological pathways that enable them to bond with those closest to them. For the newborn, the need for food, hydration and warmth typically demands that they must form a strong bond with caregivers. For the adult, these pathways support the formation of close bonds within any dyad (a relationship involving two people), including romantic partners and friendships.

John Bowlby (1907-1990), a British psychologist, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, was the first formally to identify this biological and psychological predisposition to forming close bonds with caregivers. He described it as 'a primary, biologically based motivational system, selected through evolution to promote survival through maintenance of proximity to a primary caregiver(s)'. Now commonly called 'attachment' by psychology researchers and developmental theorists, it's based on deep biological processes.

Biological basis

The main neurotransmitters involved in forming attachment relationships are oxytocin (commonly referred to as the bonding hormone) and cortisol (the stress hormone). While the science is complex, in their 2019 paper, *The Biological Bases of Attachment*, Paula Oliveira and Pasco Fearon reveal that infants separated from their caregivers often show spikes in cortisol release. People who struggle with attachment in adulthood have similarly high levels of the hormone. Attachment is central to being able to form and sustain adult relationships, but it also helps to regulate emotions and stress levels. Safely and securely attaching to someone else, such as a partner, sibling or close friend, can be a way of reducing one's stress responses.

Researchers in the field note that key attachment styles

or patterns, typically developed in the earliest years of life in relationships with caregivers, can come into play later in life. People who are securely attached can form close bonds and connect with someone else without too much anxiety about the relationship. Those with anxious attachment styles often feel worried about their relationships and experience an increased need for closeness. In this case, they may make frantic attempts to bridge any gaps when a partner or friend appears withdrawn or distant. In contrast, those with avoidant attachment styles find close relationships difficult and often prefer to maintain a distance from people. Of course, not everyone will fit neatly into any of these categories. Some might have traits from each pattern and there can be movement between styles.

As an example, someone raised by detached, uninterested caregivers inclined to reject them might go on to form an avoidant attachment style, proclaiming: 'I don't need anyone' or 'I am independent'. They might push people away, withdraw during arguments, hold back from sharing feelings or be reluctant to commit to closeness. All the while, however, they might be experiencing feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Attachment relationships also involve the concept of a secure base. A secure base is typically a person from which one can venture forth and explore the world, returning to the base for nourishment, care and comfort. While caregivers are secure bases in childhood, adults might turn to partners, close friends and safe colleagues.

Emotions and co-regulation

Problems with attachments have been found to be linked to emotional difficulties and stress. One of the ways humans manage difficult emotions is by seeking support from those close to them in a process psychologists call co-regulation. This involves using close, warm and supportive relationships and interactions to soothe and manage the experience of difficult





emotions. It might include hugs, praise and acknowledgement or the presence of a calm, supportive person in times of distress.

As adults, it's common to focus on things people can do for themselves to manage challenging emotions, including activities such as meditation, walking or artistic pursuits. It's easy to forget the importance of co-regulation, especially in individualistic societies, where the focus is on what can be done for the self by the self. Yet without underestimating the importance of self-help, co-regulation is a vital additional tool that can be beneficial in difficult times.

When learning to use co-regulation, it's helpful first to think of people who represent secure bases. Often someone who's been known to you for a long time, they are likely to be warm, kind and supportive. Trust is essential, as is the capacity to open up to them and believe they have your best interests at heart. They might include family members, a partner, close friends and trusted colleagues. Even pets can be used as co-regulation partners. In general, someone who has often been hurtful or made you feel unsafe is unlikely to be an effective secure base.

Next, it can be helpful to think about things that might prove soothing in times of distress and the people who might be best placed to provide them. For instance, if you find that talking through difficulties when you've had a row with someone is most helpful, you might want to choose a close friend who's emotionally attuned to you and good at communication. If you prefer non-verbal help and physical touch, a loving partner, an affectionate friend or a tolerant dog might be helpful. Talking

can be helpful when managing distress but it's not the only effective way to soothe oneself. The crux of co-regulation involves allowing your nervous system to absorb messages from someone who is calm and relaxed, so you can discharge your own difficult emotion and return to a state of equilibrium.

It's helpful to keep in mind that everyone has their own lives and worries and there will be occasions when people aren't available or just don't have time to help. Also, remember that they're not mind readers. For these reasons, try to have a few key people you can call on for support. You might also have to specifically identify that you are distressed and specify the support you need. This involves building basic emotional-management skills yourself and being able to recognise and name what you're feeling, as well as identifying what might soothe the problem. Ultimately, co-regulation involves understanding that it's only one of several tools in your emotional-management toolbox, but used with thought, communication and negotiation between you and your secure base, it can be a powerful force.

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ILLUSTRATIONS: ROSIE RACKHAM

BUILD A CO-REGULATION TOOLBOX

- Identify a few people (or non-human beings) who might be able to serve as secure bases. It's better to have a small group of people rather than one, as it's impossible for a single individual to meet all your emotional needs.

Use this space to write down the names of people you know, trust and who have been supportive in the past

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- Consider the emotions and situations you might struggle with as well as the ways secure bases can help soothe you when you are upset. An example might be: 'When I feel anxious at work, patting my dog helps,' or 'When I have a fight with my partner, I like to talk about it to a friend.'

Use this space to explore emotions you have previously found challenging and the ways they were soothed

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- Learn how to communicate what you need and to seek consent from your co-regulation partner. A script to use might be 'I feel X (sad/distressed/angry/scared) right now, and I think that Y (a hug/going out for an ice cream/lying in silence together) would help. Can you help me with this?'

Use this space to add sample scripts of your own

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- Think about alternative options for when a co-regulation partner might not be available. What other activities can you do to self-soothe? Examples might include controlled breathing, guided meditations, gardening, going for a walk or reading a favourite book.

Use this space to list helpful alternative activities

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