

Chapter 1. Our Need For Connectedness – Internal And External Attachment

Imagine you are one month old. No, not one month after birth; one month after conception. How dependent are you? How vulnerable are you to disruption of your attachment to your mother. Now let's say you're three years old, in a grocery store with your mother. Something shiny attracts your attention and you wander off, then you return to your mother but she's not there! How do you feel during those 30 seconds before you discover she's turned the grocery cart into the next aisle? And now you are 30 years old and your spouse's plane is delayed due to thunderstorms, and you get a call from the airline. Etc., etc. We are a very dependent species, i.e., a very attached species. We are nurtured in utero for 9 months, then another 18 years or so after birth before we are ready to take flight on our own; within the next decade, and usually more quickly, we commit ourselves to a spouse and build a new family. Attachment is crucial. Without secure attachments, all kinds of psychological maladies ensue. When we lose our attachments, we become depressed; when we face the possibility of such loss, we become highly anxious. When we never have a secure attachment in the first place, more severe consequences ensue; we are at risk for either an antisocial orientation, treating other humans as if they are objects to be used, mere mosquitos to be swatted if they are bothersome, or we may withdraw to a more schizoid, detached position. One of Freud's disciples, Karen Horney, offered a simple trichotomy for human social orientations: moving toward, against, or away from other people. We all do all three at different times, but in different proportions based on the security of our earlier attachments and our current environments, as well as the nature of our defenses when threatened (e.g., externalizing and aggressing vs internalizing and withdrawing). But our basic need is to attach, connect to, and belong with others.

Likewise, the vast majority of human beings feel a need to connect not just to other humans in a loving way, but to also feel belongingness in the larger scheme of things, connected spiritually to the universe, often to a larger being, God, who shares consciousness and a parental concern for our well being. We need to belong and connect not only in our immediate social world, but in the larger context of the universe, and to have a *raison d'être*, a meaningful reason for being, a purpose in life, preferably anchored to the meaning and purpose of the universe as a whole. Our spirituality often takes the form of religion, a belief in God, often associated with a set of moral principles and an afterlife, to give us structure in this life and relief from mortality (i.e., total disconnection from life and consciousness) via eternal life. Some find spirituality elsewhere, e.g., via environmental awe, gazing at distant stars, or the veins in a leaf, the beauty and power of a thunderstorm, while leaving the origins of the universe a beautiful mystery. Spirituality is often about spirits, i.e., external consciousness, but more fundamentally it is about connectedness, even if it doesn't involve spirits. We may focus on particular spirits, such as our version of God, or for some, ghosts/spirits of lost loved ones, or other paranormal phenomena, or we may enjoy consciousness via meditation and mindfulness, or share it via group consciousness involving shared values, purpose and missions in life. Either way, we seek external connectedness with both individual people, and in the larger context of our values and purpose, a connected place in the grand scheme of things.

In addition, internal connectedness is essential to our mental well being. We need to accept and like ourselves. If not, our low self esteem breeds dissatisfaction and perhaps depression, and we may be flooded by shame over who we are, and guilt regarding what we have done. Following traumatic experiences, we can become alienated from ourselves in other ways. In a desperate attempt to control the flood of trauma based memories and feelings, we often protect ourselves by dissociating, splitting off, suppressing horrible memories and feelings. The price of such protection, however, is a splitting of self, perhaps mild, perhaps more severe (in the event of extreme or repeated abuse/trauma), into "Me" and "Not me," acceptable and tolerable vs intolerable parts of self. The wider the divide, the more we are likely to experience posttraumatic and dissociative symptoms. While part of us wants the immediate protection that self division provides from painful memories, feelings, or negative self judgement, we simultaneously have a conflicting need to be whole, i.e., to be fully connected internally.

Worst of all is a combination of alienation from both ourselves and others, dissatisfaction with who we are, and either loss of loved ones or distrust and inability to attach to others. Spiritual attachment can be a saving grace providing us with an alternative form of external attachment when we have lost or are alienated from others, but if we are spiritually detached as well, then we are totally lost, alienated and completely disconnected, both internally and externally. Such a condition leaves us at the depths of human despair, and at risk for suicidal, permanent disconnection of ourselves from this intolerable state of conscious disconnection. Yes, we need connectedness, both internally and externally, if we are to thrive.