



SUPPORTING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Why Does Attachment Theory Matter When You Are Getting Divorced?

by Erin Oldham, Ph.D.

Attachment theory shows that the impact of those first five years on our lives lingers much longer than we would like. Through our parents, we learned what was safe and what wasn't. Their actions indicated to us when and whether we mattered and how and how loud to yell to get our needs met. Sometimes their inactions spoke even louder to us. Those early days dictate how you communicate and more importantly, how you fight.

How do you communicate?

Do you talk at or around an issue? Do you shut down in a challenging conversation? Do you add in subtle

insults? Is your tone supportive, aggressive, empathic or condescending? What's it like when you are mad?

How do you fight?

What do you do when you are mad? Do you clam up? Or, do you lean in and lay out an impenetrable argument? Do you raise your voice and walk away? Do you stonewall?

All these reactions relate to what we heard and experienced during our childhood. But there is something we can do about it. Explore your patterns and triggers. Observe what helps you make clear, good decisions.

See **Articles** and **Workshops** for more.

Research, Articles and Workshops on Healthy Relationships

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September Workshops

Attachment: The Key to Successful Relationships

Wed. Sept 16th from 6:30 – 8:30pm

Discover more about your attachment patterns and how they impact your relationships. Research-based and practical. Limited to 10 participants.

Your Brain on Divorce

Monday, Sept 21st from 7:00 to 8:30pm

Gain insight and tips to better decision-making, information processing and impulse control during the separation and divorce process.

A Kids First Center Workshop

Kidsfirstcenter.org



Love Languages

Wednesday, Sept 30th from 6:30 – 8:00pm

Learn about your love language, where it comes from and what happens when you interact with someone with a different love language. Interactive and fun.

HOW DO I REGISTER?

To sign up, go to
localflamesmaine.com



How do I date wisely after divorce?

by Erin Oldham, Ph.D.

The first thing we have to deal with as divorced people is... how to set up the perfect online dating profile. This is written a bit facetiously. But honestly, the major thing on the minds of the recently split is how to find someone new, and better. Drafting your first dating profile usually happens about two weeks to two months *before* the divorce is finalized. Not too long after that we are dealing with the question of when to introduce our new dating

partner to our kids. This happens anywhere from one week (not recommended!) to one month to six months after we meet someone. And way too soon after that, we are deciding how to merge our family with another in, yikes, the same house!

All of this can happen during the time of 'unreason', that time when we are post-divorced and pre-sane. During this period the concept of time is elusive and the hormones from

meeting and touching someone new are in serious overdrive. We believe we can see the future! Once you take a breath, you start to realize that the relationship before you is a relationship just like any other, where we make mistakes, missteps, and misfires. Now however, there are lots of other people involved in our mistakes, namely our children. So take a breath, and think about **these three suggestions** as you date post-divorce.

1. Have the conversation with your kids.

Ideally, a newly-dating adult has prepared their children *prior* to getting online and dating. (See “What can I say to my children?” for ideas.) That is what the experts, including myself, recommend. From much experience, however, I know most of us start dating before having this conversation. That’s okay. Just have it as soon as possible.

2. Be prepared to answer hard questions.

Your kids are concerned about their experience. They want to know what is going to happen to them. You may be thinking about what to wear on your hiking date to look cool and casual, yet fit and vivacious, but your 5 year-old is thinking about whether he will have a new dad, new brothers and sisters, and whether he will have to move from his favorite bedroom. Your 15 year-old is wondering if you are having sex with other people and whether she will have a nasty new step parent. Children are the ultimate pragmatists and a bit egotistical in

their perspective, and they have every right to be. If there are any questions that you don’t expect, give yourself the time to think through your answer by saying, “Let me think about that”, or “I am going to talk to your mom about that one and get back to you.”

3. Observe yourself as you date.

Don’t do things you wouldn’t advise for your kids when they start dating. You are now a serious role model for your children. You were before too, but now you are going to show them what it is like to meet people, date, build relationships, and sustain those relationships. And you are doing it during a time when emotions and challenging situations are circling around you. Be easy on yourself, be honest with yourself, and be honest with your children.



What are my children concerned about?

These are the questions spinning around in your child's head.

- Will my dad still be my dad? Do I have to have a new mom?

- Will I have to move? Will I have to go to a new school?

- Will I have new brothers and sisters? Will my mom/dad love them better than me?

- What is going to happen to me? Are things going to change?

What can I say to my children?

Keep it simple, straightforward and honest. Keep their developmental level in mind. What words and concepts will make sense to them? Don’t bring the hurt and the pain, or your feelings about your ex into it. Have the talk at a time when you can be calm and measured. These are some refrains you can use.

- As your dad and I form new lives, we will both be meeting and dating new people. It is nice to go through life with someone and that is why I will be meeting new people.

- You will not be expected to be a part of it unless you want to be.

- It is natural for adults to want to live their lives with other people.

- It takes time to really get to know people, so I may date a couple people before I find a person I want to date over the long term.

- No one will ever replace your dad (or mom). I will always be your mom. Your dad will always be your dad. We will always be your parents.

- You come first and I will make decisions about my dating life with you in my mind. I will look for someone who is good for me and who is good for you all too.

- There won’t be any big changes in your life that you don’t know about. I will let you know ahead of time

about anything that impacts your life.

- Do you have any questions?

Do I have to tell them??

Yes, you do. This is one of those hard moments as a parent where you would love not to have adult responsibilities. It may seem easier to just keep on keeping on, or to think that you are protecting your children by keeping them in the dark, or that they are too young to be in the know. Let me clue you in... kids know whether you tell them or not. They see you texting, they hear your phone pinging with the latest OkCupid notification, they notice you laughing more, and going out more. If you don't tell them, they will come up with a story and the story will be much more dramatic, dire, and fanciful than reality. So suck it up, sit down, breath, and be honest with your children about what life is like for you in this new reality.

The last word...

This is a hard time. You are finding someone new while finding yourself at the same time. The best you can do is to be aware of the choices you are making and to give yourself permission to begin each day anew. We all make mistakes during this time. Apologize, be honest with yourself and your children, and start again.

4 Ways to Be: What we can do to foster attachment in our relationships

by Erin Oldham, Ph.D.

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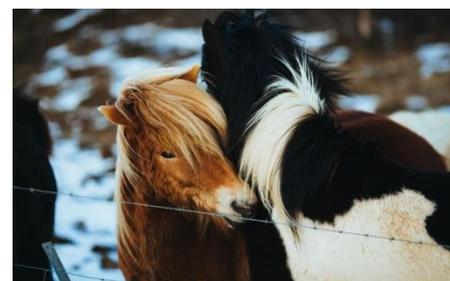
Researchers in neuroscience have determined there are three different “emotion-motivation” systems that are involved in lust, romantic love and attachment. While “lust” encourages us to sleep with basically anyone and everyone, and “romantic love” calms us down a bit and encourages us to focus on finding a specific, suitable person to have babies with, attachment is the way in which we can actually stay with someone long enough to “complete species-specific parental duties” (Seriously, researchers say that. Researchers are super fun and funny!)

For the first couple months of a relationship, there are awesome-feeling neurotransmitters coursing through your brain helping you to stay with and explore your new relationship. These neurotransmitters actually allow you to believe your mate is unique in this world as they focus your attention on all the positive characteristics while ignoring potential red flags. In addition to the help your brain is providing, there are other things you can intentionally do to assist your new partnership to

thrive and it all has to do with attachment.

We attach to others when we feel safe.

When we feel safe, we can be vulnerable and in those tender, together moments of closeness we start to attach. It was pretty much the same thing way back when with your parents. We attached to our parents when they responded to us in ways that made us feel safe and loved. The more they explained the rules to us, provided guidance, helped us negotiate the world, hugged us, listened to us and picked us up when we fell down, the more we attached securely to them. As an adult, we can encourage attachment to other adults by creating a safe, loving, predictable environment.



How we make others feel safe enough to attach.

1. Be explicit about the rules of the game.

Even though kids, and many adults, seem to resist rules, we all actually perform better and feel better when we understand what is expected of us and know how we should be behaving. We need to communicate the rules of the relationship. Maybe this relates to whether you believe in dating multiple people at the same time or how often you like to communicate. Maybe this relates to how you celebrate holidays or whether you like to go out or eat in. It is all good, as long as you communicate the 'rules' to your partner explicitly.

2. Be consistent.

Being able to anticipate what is going to happen next makes all of us feel calmer. In a relationship, this plays out in consistency in communication and actions. For instance, if you normally text when you are on your way to her house, do so consistently so she knows when you will be showing. If you tend to show up 5 minutes late to everything, no need to be perfect, just tell your partner so they know what to expect. Consistency also means being there for your partner when they need you, essentially being trustworthy and dependable. When something bad happens, you want to know someone has your back.

Note: If you have problems being consistent (which is not unusual), examine why? Does being consistent make you feel locked in or hampered

in your movements? Or do you simply have a distractible personality and don't always remember. Explain to your partner your tendencies and ask your partner what types of consistency are important to him or her.

3. Be empathic (not sympathetic).

This is key to making your partner feel heard (and that feeling of being heard and understood is what strengthens the attachment between two people). Empathy is the ability to listen and see a situation from another's perspective. Empathy involves simply listening and hearing your partner. It does not involve fixing your partner ("oh, no worries, just do this") or diminishing their concerns ("at least you have your health"). It doesn't involve talking at all. The key to listening is not to talk. Try it! You will make your partner feel great and you may learn a thing or two.

4. Be kind.

We all thrive on kind words and gestures. We all suffer too little kindness in this world. Take a moment and compliment your partner, or just listen to them talk about their day, or give them a hug.



Questions to Ask Yourself and Your Partner

The goal is to be explicit with your partner about the rules so that the relationship feels consistent and predictable. Ask these questions:

1. How do you prefer to communicate? By phone, by text, by email? How often? What type of communication makes you uncomfortable?
2. How much time do you like to spend with someone you are seeing? How much alone time do you prefer?
3. Are you affectionate? How do you feel about PDA (public displays of affection)?
4. What kinds of gifts do you really appreciate?
5. What makes you feel loved? What can I do to make sure you feel safe and loved?
6. Are there points in a relationship when you typically start feeling uncomfortable? What happens? What should I expect? Is there anything I can do to make your more comfortable?

Get to know yourself, get to know your partner and create a safe environment to the best of your ability to let love and attachment thrive.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Come to the Attachment Workshop on September 16th.

Go to Localflamesmaine.com to register

STOP! Read this before you fall into the same relationship trap... again.

by Erin Oldham, Ph.D.

I have been doing some heavy lifting. Head down, eyes scanning left to right, engrossed in a book on how the brain develops on an airplane to Los Angeles and then again while flying to St. John. The fact that I am reading a book on the fallacies of the neocortex and the simple brilliance and vulnerability of the limbic brain on vacation gives you a sense of how much I love this stuff.

Some of the stunning things I learned...

1. We literally can't see (healthy) love right in front of us.

In childhood, we store an impression of what love *feels* like from our parents or whomever we are around to attach to. That impression is ingrained in our neural networks. As children, we do not discern in our attachments. We do not judge the goodness of our parents. As we age, we prefer the emotional patterns of our family, regardless of the merits of them. Let's say that emotional pattern is one of detached, emotional unavailability. We then tend to look for adults that replicate what we think of as "love" which in this case is someone who is detached from their experiences. We can get in a relationship with someone who is different, maybe very affectionate and giving, but this won't feel good to us, it doesn't feel like "love" to us, so we let them go, leaving our partner wondering what went wrong.

The upside: With really effective therapy and/or deep introspection, we gain insight and awareness of our patterns and how to change them (and pick better partners).

"Childhood chisels its patterns into pliable neural networks, while later experiences wield weaker influence on the evolving person. Often the only emotional learning one sees after childhood is the reinforcement of existing fundamentals."

– Lewis, Amini & Lannon (2000)

2. There is no such thing as an accurate memory (Freud was ridiculously wrong)!

Memories are not neatly laid down, available for retrieval at any time or with intensive psychoanalysis (as Freud hypothesized). We "remember" with our neurons and thus we are disposed to see more of what we have already seen, hear more of what we have heard previously and think what we have thought before. As we form neural networks, each new observation, word or sound instantly gets associated with similar, past observations, words and memories. Our past and our general temperament guide us to encode or reinforce our experience in specific ways. So we form memories in our own individual way and then we continually rework those memories as we have new experiences. Optimistic

people tend to remember happy times, depressive types more easily recall loss, abandonment and despair and anxious people ruminate on past threats. This told me a lot about why my previous husband (my was-band) and I remembered our fights entirely differently.

The upside: You can train your brain to see things differently. Meditation helps!



3. No type of therapy is better than any other. The only thing that matters is the therapist!

This one makes so much sense. There is limited evidence that one type of therapy works over another type of therapy. What researchers have discovered is that it is the therapist themselves that makes the difference. A therapist who can form a relationship with her client, an actual emotionally balanced relationship emanating from limbic resonance (I'll explain more on this in the "your brain on divorce" workshop) is the most effective in guiding the client towards what healthy relationships "feel" like. Once the clients have enough of the experience of a healthy relationship, such that they are

reforming their neural networks, they can then use that template out in the real world. Basically, someone can describe a “healthy relationship” to you as much as he wants but until you experience it personally, there is nothing in you, your brain or your behaviors that will change.

The upside: A good therapist has been shown to actually change your brain.



4. We need love to survive. Literally!

Back in the days when there was no one watching over researchers who had a bit of a God complex, some unbelievably cruel experiments were done. In the 1940’s (not that long ago!), an experiment was conducted on forty newborn infants to determine the importance of affection. Twenty of the infants were in a facility where the caregivers were instructed to provide the basics (food, water, shelter) but to withhold communication, nurturing and affection. The other twenty infants were cared for normally. After four months, half of the infants in the no-interaction group had died. They, then, halted the experiment. Beyond this grotesque example, there is clear evidence in how the brain has

developed and functions that love is not a luxury but a necessity.

The upside: Love and attachment heals! That love can come from pets, friends, family members and lovers.

5. When we lose a partner, we literally lose our ability to regulate ourselves emotionally.

Ever behaved unexpectedly badly during a breakup and wondered wtf just happened? Yep, me too. When we lose another person, we lose some of our ability to regulate ourselves emotionally and may act out of “character” in the aftermath. When we form a partnership with another human, we have a real, as in tangible, impact on the way their brain is functioning and they have a similar impact on our brain. Think of the good feeling you get from being around a positive person – that is them having a similar impact on your limbic brain. This impact comes from the *limbic resonance* between two people (come to the workshop to get the full explanation of this). When we lose a person from our lives, we lose a part of ourselves. A portion of our neural activity depends on the presence of that other living brain. When we are in a healthy relationship, with each person taking perpetual care of the other, we thrive (and actually live longer!). We feel whole, centered, and alive. When we lose a person, even if the relationship had deteriorated, we miss and yearn for that sense of being known, and we lose our ability to behave nicely for a while as well.

The upside: We learn to regulate again as we heal. Therapy, journaling, yoga and meditation help!

There is so much here and so much more I didn’t have space to write about. We are going to get into it at a free workshop on September 21st at Kids First Center. Come discuss!

For further reading on these topics, I recommend "A General Theory of Love" by Thomas Lewis, MD., Fari Amini, M.D. and Richard Lannon, M.D. for an intense scientific read and “Buddha’s Brain” by Rich Hanson for a lighter read.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Come to the Your Brain on Divorce on Monday, September 21st.

Go to Localflamesmaine.com to register

Erin Oldham, Ph.D.

Divorce Consultant and Relationship Coach

Erin works with people as they navigate getting into, sustaining and getting out of relationships. She also works with people as they negotiate divorce and the post-divorce world. Erin has a Ph.D. in Psychology and has been researching how children and adults form healthy relationships for 25 years. She is approachable, pragmatic, empathic and effective. She facilitates fun, engaging workshops on these topics as well. She works on her research part-time and collaborates with up to 10 coaching clients a month.

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