

ANXIOUS, AVOIDANT, SECURE?

Applying attachment theory in coaching



ATTACHMENT THEORY

- **Attachment styles are the result of how we are parented**
- **Profoundly affect our behaviour**
- **Affect coach and client equally**
- **Influence the effectiveness of the coaching**
- **Self awareness helps coach and client**

A (very) brief history of childhood

- Parenting styles vary hugely according to culture and era
- There are no 'common values' about parenting
- The word 'parenting' did not appear until the 1970s
- Attitudes may be diametrically opposite at different periods of time or different cultures, eg re
 - independence/obedience
 - risk and exploration/confinement
 - Gender roles
 - Reward/punishment

- **In the late medieval period, 50% of children died before 10 (eg measles, diphtheria, accidents)**
- **Developmental milestones were not formally studied until 20thc**
- **Emphasis was on survival not emotional health**
- **Within living memory in the UK, childcare was frequently outsourced in all classes to eg, other family members, nannies, wet nurses, orphanages, governesses, schools**
- **Migration: children were frequently left with other family while parents sought a better life in another country**
- **Babies were ‘swaddled’ to prevent movement – parents had too much else to do**

Early 20thc Western societies

‘Don’t pick them up’: ‘Handle Baby as little as possible’ (childcare book, 1917)

‘Good childcare’ meant giving enough food

‘Leave them to cry’ = encouraging ‘independence’; avoiding ‘spoilt brats’

Freud, Jung, Adler: childhood influences the problems you experience as an adult; a psychiatric approach

Children were seen as 'objects' into mid 20th

- **A 'troublesome' child was seen as needing reform**
- **Physical punishment considered 'normal' in schools and at home in all social classes**
- **Emphasis was on the needs of parents not the emotional needs of the child**
- **Hospitalisation: parents were prevented from visiting because it 'upset' children**
- **Unnatural calm in hospitalized/institutionalized children seen as 'proof' that this was right**
- **Boarding school at 8 was 'normal' for parents who could afford it (seen as toughening children up, removing them from malign influence of their mothers?)**

Massive social change in later 20thc

- **Better contraception**
- **Economic growth**
- **IT revolution, easy access to information**
- **Social media and browsers – eg Mumsnet**
- **Easier divorce**
- **Blended families**
- **Exposure of widespread child sexual abuse**
- **‘Equality’ legislation**
- **Less rigid gender roles**

Recognizing children's emotional needs

Moving to a systemic approach where child is seen in family context; child as the 'actor out' of family dynamics

TV programmes (eg *House of Tiny Tears*, *Supernanny*) have popularized these ideas

Many best selling books on bringing up children; Dr Benjamin Spock (1947) revolution: trust yourself, be flexible; his book sold 50m copies; accused of encouraging 'permissiveness'

Penelope Leach, *Baby and Child* (1977): a developmental approach emphasizing the child's perspective

The rise of 'attachment parenting' in 21st c

20thc pioneers: 1. John Bowlby(1907 – 1990)
British psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, child development researcher and writer

Raised by nursemaids and nannies; rarely saw his parents

Investigated separation from parents in WW2 (evacuees , Kindertransport)

Proved the essential need of human infants for attachment

Linked this with later behavioural problems – focus on ‘maternal deprivation’

Massive impact on institutional child care (eg hospitalized children)

Used by governments to justify denying mothers employment

20thc pioneers: 2. Mary Ainsworth (1913-1999) US-Canadian psychologist

Worked briefly with Bowlby in London, later collaborated with him

Ingenious action research project 1965: 'The Infant Strange Situation': caregiver leaves infant, returns, stranger enters/leaves, caregiver returns; child's and parent's behaviour categorized

<https://youtu.be/QTsewNrHUU>

Infant's and caregiver's behavior classified into attachment 'types'

Replicated and refined in many subsequent studies

Breakout groups in pairs

Your own experience of being parented

- **What 3 words would you use to describe each of your parents (or primary caregivers?)**
- **What was the impact on you as a child?**
- **What kind of a child did they want you to be?**

The essential propositions. Parenting styles:

- **affect the emotional well being of a child in predictable ways**
– ‘attachment styles’
- **have long lasting effects on how we relate to others**
- **May govern our willingness and ability to learn, be vulnerable, trust others in relationships, manage boundaries**
- **Will always be present in coaching relationships and in issues brought by clients to some extent**

Attachment styles are not fixed or rigid

- **We may be a blend eg of Secure with some elements of Anxious or Avoidant, it's a spectrum for most of us**
- **Genes influence our personality and behaviour**
- **Intelligence, education and experience may soften or reinforce our attachment styles**
- **Self knowledge and personal development can make a big difference to how well we manage them**
- **In coaching we may be able to work with clients on understanding and managing the impact of their typical styles**
- **360 feedback and psychometric instruments may also give us clues and a way to put this topic on the agenda**

Secure
parenting
involves

- A 'good enough' balance between autonomy and dependency
- Warm responsiveness to crying and distress
- Caring, touching, cuddling
- Fun, play, enjoyment with the child
- Ability to set parent's own needs to one side
- Being emotionally available without smothering
- Frequent, positive contact
- Clear but not harsh boundaries
- Consistent behaviour

Secure
parenting
produces
people with a
Secure
attachment
style

- **Confident without being cocky**
- **Open to learning**
- **Able to be vulnerable without being needy**
- **Able to make mature relationships**
- **Able to allow partners and colleagues to have appropriate levels of independence**
- **Can provide reasonable boundaries for self and others**
- **Accept responsibility for own emotional wellbeing**
- **Able to regulate their own emotions**
- **Open to giving and receiving feedback**

Inconsistent,
anxious
parenting
means

- Sometimes parent is warm, sometimes cool
- Child may be left alone for long periods
- Parent disappearing – divorce, illness, boarding school, death
- Narcissistic parent insists that child puts parent's needs first
- The child is blamed for not being good enough, eg 'wrong' sex, 'wrong' looks, not 'clever', not 'obedient'
- Child is blamed for being born – unwanted, 'you hurt me when you were born'
- The parent may be over-protective
- The parent may invade the child's privacy, getting too close

Inconsistent,
anxious
parenting
may produce
people with an
Anxious
attachment
style

- **Clingy, needy, may overwhelm others with their demands**
- **Profound fear of abandonment**
- **Self critical and insecure**
- **Always anticipating rejection**
- **Resentful and angry when they don't get attention**
- **Given to emotional outbursts which they 'can't help'**
- **If reproached, beg forgiveness**
- **Become 'rescuers' as a way of 'earning' love and attention**
- **May develop depression, anxiety problems, gastrointestinal problems**

Emotionally cool parenting

- Parent is preoccupied, eg with work, illness, poverty, alcohol, drugs
- May outsource parenting to paid carers or other family members
- Cool style, emotionally unavailable, detached
- Over-focused on child's performance
- Over-demanding – expects too much too soon
- Over-emphasizes independence for fear of 'spoiling'
- Gives messages about 'toughening up', 'stop crying'

Emotionally cool
parenting may
produce an
Avoidant
(‘Dismissive’)
attachment style

- Profound fear of being ‘smothered’
- Constant wish for space and detachment
- Avoids expressing feelings – may lack a feelings vocabulary
- Over-emphasizes work and intellectual analysis
- May do ‘cognitive empathy’ but not the real thing
- Says one thing but does another: leaves people guessing about ‘real’ feelings
- Neglects relationships or takes them for granted
- Mocks people who seem ‘needy’
- Denies own vulnerability
- Has over-positive view of self
- Gets angry with negative feedback
- Finds commitment difficult
- May develop hypertension, migraines, musculo-skeletal problems

Chaotic parenting

- Violence towards the child or other family members
- Violence and threat in the wider environment – war, famine, lack of physical safety
- Highly inconsistent, no clear boundaries or expectations
- Alcohol and drug problems
- Severe mental illness
- Poverty
- Physically neglectful
- Emotionally neglectful
- Sexual and/or physical abuse
- Child's fears are mocked
- Shouting, yelling, intimidation

Chaotic
parenting may
produce people
with a
Disorganized
attachment
style

- **Negative views of self and others**
- **Cynicism, low expectations of relationships**
- **Believes self to be unworthy of love**
- **Hypervigilant – always alert to threat**
- **Unpredictable moods**
- **Unwise risk-taking**
- **Short term thinking**
- **Can't build trust**
- **Afraid of change, detached from emotion**
- **Approach-Avoid patterns in relationships**
- **May seek partners who replay the parental dynamic, staying with abusive partners**

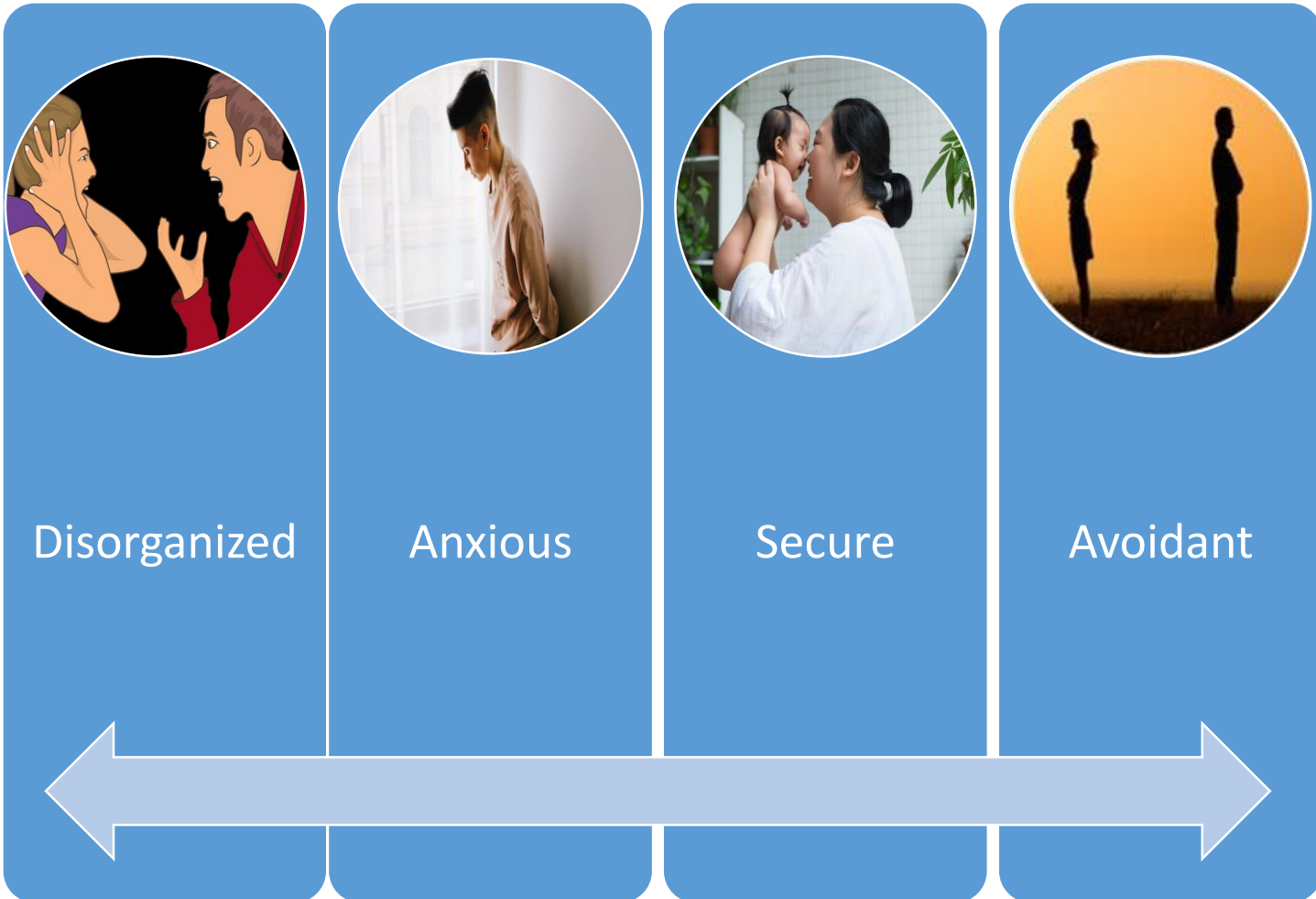
A bit of neuroscience on attachment

- Our brains develop from the quality of connection with our earliest care givers
- Emotional capacity for intimacy develops from relating to our main caregiver
- Right hemisphere of the brain develops first and is where emotional experience is encoded
- Attachment involves emotional processing and the autonomic nervous system
- Human babies are very tuned in to facial expressions, gaze and touch: they are constantly assessing safety
- 'Attunement' is important

4 attachment styles : a summary

Primary caregiver's behaviour to child	Child's assumptions about themselves	Attachment style
Positive, loving, accepting, calm	Confident, willing to explore, take risks 'I am loved'; 'I feel safe'	SECURE
Angry, confused, inconsistent, distracted, highly conditional	Worried, upset, needy. 'I feel unsafe' 'What do I have to do to be loved?'	ANXIOUS
Cold, dismissive, distracted, ill, absent	'I am unloved'; 'I will cut myself off from feelings'	AVOIDANT
Chaotic, violent, alcoholic, absent	Confusion, 'I must look out for myself', 'No-one can be	DISORGANIZED

Most of us will have some blend of attachment styles



What's your style? Breakout in pairs

Where are you on the attachment spectrum?

What's the impact on you as a coach, eg

kinds of clients you like working with?

kinds of clients you might find tricky?



Attachment styles in coaching clients: breakout groups in trios

- **One example each of a client whose problems seem to have been affected by their attachment style**
- **How did this show up in the coaching?**
- **What happened?**

When attachment styles meet in coach and client

- ***Secure coach with Secure client*** – everything could be (relatively) easy
- **Any of the other combinations could be problematical**
 - ***Avoidant coach – Avoidant client*** may move into analytical discussion of theories and models or focus on factors external to the client
 - ***Anxious coach - Anxious client*** may dissolve into mutual dependency with underlying resentment, anything potentially ‘uncomfortable’ is avoided
 - ***Anxious coach – Avoidant client*** or vice versa, likely to lead to early termination of the contract

When attachment styles meet in coach and client: breakouts in pairs

- **One example each of where the coach-client combo created challenges**
- **What did you do?**
- **What advice would you give to yourself now?**

‘Rescuing’

- Physical rescuing is about the needs of the person being rescued – eg in a fire, earthquake, road accident
- *Psychological* rescuing is about the needs of the rescuer
- Chronic rescuers learnt in childhood that their own needs had to come second; their attachment style is likely to be Anxious
- They learnt that they would get approval and love if they did what others wanted
- Psychological rescuing can look heroic but it’s underpinned by pity, an assumption that the ‘rescuee’ is incapable in some way
- It always comes with a price tag: *if I rescue you, you will give me gratitude, approval, love*

‘Rescuing’ in executive coaching clients

- **Inability to delegate**
- **Long hours**
- **Permeable boundaries with staff, trying to turn direct reports into friends**
- **Gossiping, being indiscreet**
- **Challenging to give feedback – fear of being disliked/rejected**
- **Loss of confidence, lack of assertiveness, saying yes when they mean no**
- **Tiredness, irritability, drinking too much, difficulty sleeping**
- **Victim thinking – externalizing their problems**
- **Interpreting negative feedback from a boss as ‘bullying’**

‘Rescuing’ behaviour in coaches involves *faux altruism*

- Believing that the client can’t operate without you
- Wobbly boundary management: offering free sessions; letting sessions run on beyond the allotted time, not challenging lateness or last minute cancellations
- Feeling that the client is becoming your friend
- Drawing back from offering feedback
- The client is not making progress but you are still in frequent contact with them
- Over-identifying with the client – ‘that happened to me, too!’
- Collusion: ‘you’re right, this organization/boss is toxic’, attributing difficulties to external causes
- Offering to act as advocate for the client, eg in asking for extra sessions

Rescuing and being 'over- helpful'

I rescue you from
your pain
/inadequacy in
order to escape
my anxiety that
you can't cope

I am over-
helpful/rescue
you in the hope
you will love me
for it and not
hurt me

I hope you will
see me as I fear
I am invisible

I rescue to
displace my
feelings of
frustration and
anger with your
inadequacy

And
beneath
this

I will resent you for taking and not giving back

I can fall into feeling the victim

I may become a perpetrator towards you.

I am insecure in my attachment and this is a pattern of relating from the 'there and then'

What to do?

- We don't have easy prescriptions
- It starts with understanding your own style
- Then being willing to ask clients about their early lives in ways that will reveal info about their attachment experience
- Then – it all depends...
- Some clients will respond well to explanations of the various styles, then it can become a helpful vocabulary for your work together
- With some it's just a useful private framework for you