

## BACKGROUND

Attachment refers to the affectionate relationship or bond we have with others. Attachment styles between children and their caregivers are established in early life. People can display healthy attachments to each other, or can have avoidant, disorganised, or ambivalent attachment styles. In a healthy care environment, children are held in high regard. They experience love and understand that they are loved. They feel attunement with their caregiver. This type of care experience provides other positives in terms of their sense of self, their ability to cope with their environment, and their ability to achieve. In abusive or neglectful environments however, healthy attunement does not occur. Sometimes care environments can be very damaging, where the child may tune out as a protective mechanism to disconnect from their experience. Other young people may become hypervigilant, hyper-aroused and anxious about what to expect next. They lose trust and grow to understand that they can be harmed by their caregiver/ attachment figure.

Children in care and young people who encounter neglect, abuse or significant difficulties at a young age may find these events traumatising across their development. These events may lead to trauma responses. Exposure to traumatic events in early life can set the basis for a lack of trust in self, others and the wider environment. Trauma can also cause difficulties in the young person's ability to process information and learn. Unfavourable early experiences may lead to an inability to self-regulate, forward plan, value themselves, or associate with positive or helpful peers. This can lead to reactive behaviour, frequent disappointment and confusion, as well as behavioural difficulties and lifelong problems. Young people who display trauma responses from their early experiences, most likely have encountered frightening and overwhelming situations in their past. It is important to remember that they most likely had no control over their circumstances and may have been powerless to defend themselves. For young people in this situation, they may experience a range of problems that extend across their development. Some examples of associated difficulties or trauma responses, stemming from neglectful or abusive early care environments, include the following:

- Disorganised thinking, shame, avoidance of painful memories or situations. Cognitive delays and inability to attend to new learning.
- Receptive and expressive communication delays, memory difficulties, describing sequence of past events or their personal story. Poor planning into the future. Physiological regulation (e.g. sleep), somatic health symptoms, poor emotional self-regulation.
- Proneness to react aggressively when threatened, or underreact to a situation. Avoidance of others, or low protective behaviours which leads to exploitation by others.
- Hypervigilance and anxiety, fear about the future. Lack of trust in others, difficulty with change, strong need to control others, or the present situation due to a lack of control in the past.
- Social difficulties, relationship difficulties, dominating interactions, being unclear about roles within relationships, withdrawing from others, following maladaptive relationship patterns.
- Substance misuse to gain relief, developing addictions to other activities to feel better: computers, particular hobby interests, sexual activity, antisocial behaviours.

### Helping young people with associated trauma and attachment needs, as HYPAR mentor:

Be mindful that the young person with needs associated with trauma responses and attachment difficulties needs help to see the wider picture. They need you to be there for them when they are unable to manage. They need you to serve as a consistent figure in their lives who can role model appropriate behaviour, and help them manage their feelings of discomfort or anger. In addition, these young people will require you help them regulate their emotions and learn ways to cope when setbacks occur. Young people who demonstrate trauma responses may need you to guide them in how to seek help from others. They may need you to show them how to solve problems calmly, how to maintain a positive outlook about the future, and how to place boundaries in and repair relationships. They can benefit from your support to help them plan, and identify steps to envision a good or better life ahead.

## HYPAR'S HANDS ON APPROACHES, RESPONDING TO TRAUMA AND ATTACHMENT NEEDS:

### Helpful ideas when supporting children and young people with trauma and attachment needs.

- When difficult behaviour is encountered it is important to remain sensitive, show empathy but remain firm about boundaries or expectations. It is also helpful to highlight why something cannot occur through a natural consequence. For instance, missing a time for an appointment, due to time spent prior, working through a difficult situation such as a behaviour escalation. This is a better option than focussing on undesired behaviour. Showing frustration in these situations is likely to be unhelpful. This can bring about more stress or shame for the young person. Expressing frustration at the young person without an empathic and problem solving approach can also be damaging to your working relationship with them.
- Understanding your own reactions to difficult behaviour, or behavioural triggers, is an advantage whilst in the mentor role. Reflect on this and use your self-knowledge to regain your focus as a mentor.
- Focus on the young person's feelings when they are frustrated e.g. "I can understand you feel disappointed". When they are facing difficulty let them know you see they need help with a specific action. Assist them when this happens: "I can see you struggling with...". Focus as much as possible on all of the things the young person has done well "you were great at listening this morning. I appreciate it". Calmly demonstrate that you understand their perspective and their frustrations. Offer praise and acknowledgment of their efforts.
- You do not need to be qualified as a counsellor in order to help the young person. Simply being there and acknowledging pain with them (and not necessarily problem solving at each instance) is helpful e.g. "that was hard for you to feel unwanted by your friends today". Providing a calm environment where they can feel safe, enjoy themselves, feel attuned to your care, and have people they can trust is also therapeutic.
- Create your own individualised safety plan for the young people you work with, regarding steps to take when a young person shows challenging behaviour, needs support, or wants to express their emotions. You might be able to tell when they have been triggered by an event which relates to their past difficulties or when they lack self belief or are frightened. Some behavioural expressions which may indicate the young person has been triggered by a painful thought or memory, includes times where they show anger, challenging or bizarre behaviour, dissociation, avoidance and withdrawal.
- Set the basis for a therapeutic, safe and responsive environment through consistency and being attuned to the young persons needs. This will also enable opportunities to teach self-regulation, healthy attachments to others, help-seeking, maintaining a positive focus on life, self esteem and setting the basis for self sufficiency.

**Further work:** One helpful way to think about direct therapeutic support for young people with trauma and attachment needs is the hierarchy (or pyramid) of need by Kim Golding (2007). This model outlines the following stages in supporting someone with trauma and attachment needs. Briefly, the hierarchy of need begins with the first stage of feeling safe, before being able to move on to developing relationships. Experiencing comfort and co-regulation is the next stage which moves into empathy and reflection, then resilience/ resources and finally exploring trauma and mourning losses (which is a stage that does not happen right away and may take many years to develop). Young people can move up or down the hierarchy depending on changes in their circumstances.

When in doubt, apply the following problem solving framework; What behaviour am I seeing? What is the young person really saying (e.g. "I'm hurt, I need help with my feelings, something has triggered my fears"). What purpose does their current behaviour serve (e.g. pushing people away, to scare people, to feel powerful). How can I be patient, calm and empathic, whilst being firm and guiding when necessary? How do I ensure that what I do is helpful?

## FURTHER READING:

### References

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