

De-coding Attachment Needs from the Cradle to the Grave:

***The Circle of Security* graphic**

Cracking the code of love

In Dr. Sue Johnson's words we have "cracked the code for love." All the hostility and rampant aggression – all the crazy making and the cold, sullen, seemingly nonchalant shrugs are code for the same panicked child's cry, "Mommy, mommy don't leave me!" Tessa and Greg know this well: "She raises her voice and I feel like the 7 year-old whose mother just scolded me for burning the toast: 'Are you stupid or what!' I throw up my hands and disappear in silence. What's the use?" sighs Greg. Tessa protests, "And I am left alone, feeling like a 5 year old screaming at my mom not to leave me alone at kindergarten! I do raise my voice – I'm desperate to get his attention!" They begin to name their familiar dance of distress – repeated failed attempts to be safe with one another – the Burnt Toast Tango.

Circle of Security International has a simple graphic that conveys Bowlby's assertion that human beings, like all mammals, have "secure base" and "safe haven" needs, and that these needs to have one or two others to count on as reliably available and emotionally responsive endure "from the cradle to the grave." The intention of this article is to paint a word picture of the Circle of Security (COS) graphic and to show how this graphic, which is adaptable to different developmental stages, puts the focus upon de-coding attachment needs hidden in distress signals, in order to shape loving connection and secure bonds.

A fundamental de-pathologizing task in EFT is to help couples de-code their negative interaction patterns and unclear messages and mis-attempts to get their basic attachments needs met. For example, to access the underlying fear of rejection and reshape its expression that now seethes with hostility ("Don't speak to me in that tone of voice – as though I am nothing to you!"), the EFT map guides us to work collaboratively with partners to access the softer attachment fears and unmet needs hidden in their negative interaction patterns. Likewise the COS is oriented towards helping parents to decipher the needs that are embedded in children's and adolescent's various cries and calls, – needs that could be misinterpreted as misbehavior or lack of cooperation and so on.

Graphic of attachment needs

Twenty years ago, Glen Cooper, Kent Hoffman, and Bert Powell. combined object relations with attachment theory to create a model for supporting families.. They reduced complex theory into an elegantly simple yet powerful graphic called the "Circle of Security." This graphic of parents attending to a child's needs has two open

hands: From the upper hand an arc extending outward, represents the secure base, with the words as if expressed by the child – “I need you to support my exploration,” and more concretely, “I need you to watch over me, delight in me, help me and enjoy with me.” From the lower hand, an arc extending outward, represents the safe haven, with the words as if expressed by the child, “I need you to welcome my coming to you,” and more concretely, “I need you to protect me, comfort me, delight in me and organize my feelings.” The two arcs, from the outstretched hands form one oval supporting exploration away from and welcoming back to comfort and safety. You Tube animations of the Circle of Security ©1998 can be found at <http://circleofsecurity.net/resources/>

Jude Cassidy, professor of Psychology at the University of Maryland, director of the Maryland Child and Family Development Laboratory, attachment researcher and co-author with Phil Shaver of the *Handbook of Attachment*, has a particular interest in attachment theory as applied to parenting and in particular, in providing adolescents with a secure base. Collaboratively with the Circle of Security originators she expanded this approach from parenting infants and children to helping parents meet adolescents’ need for a secure base. In spite of obvious behavioral and emotional developmental differences, the essential secure base needs and processes continue throughout life. For instance, an infant’s cry for comfort followed by a struggle to be free to crawl away, may show up in adolescence as a swing between fierce and self-confident independence on the one hand, to vulnerable, insecure dependence with pleas for reassurance on the other: From “Leave me alone, I can live my own life!” to “What’s for dinner” or “Nobody likes me ‘cause I’m too ugly!” Cassidy shows a COS graphic for adolescents. The same words are used to describe the secure base/safe haven needs for adolescents as for children and in place of a child in diapers or toddler’s clothing, there are teens, with a backpack, a bicycle and skateboards.

Relational security at all ages regulates emotion

Cassidy explores the developmental shifts in expression around these needs and proposes that parenting problems are essentially problems in parental emotion regulation. The antidote lies in parenting that is focused upon nurturing the relationship with the child or adolescent. The COS graphic conveys that emotions are effectively regulated when an individual has a relational safe base for confidence, mastery and strength and a safe haven for comfort, support and reassurance. A child or adolescent, held safely and securely in parental hands that flexibly support needs for exploring and expanding his or her world and reliably meet needs for comfort and protection, can regulate his or her emotions in the context of relationship. Cassidy proposes that the simple graphic of attachment needs, can also be extended to adult romantic partners: A set of open hands at each end of the oval represent partners functioning as the hands for each other. Unlike parent child relationships where caregiving is the parent's responsibility and care receiving is the child's role, secure

adult relationships involve both giving and receiving care.

Circle of Security training helps parents to tune into both the needs embedded in a child's cry and in an adolescent's insolence or erratic behavior. EFT couple therapists see the partners in front of us equally struggling and unable to send clear messages in their attempts to meet attachment needs for safety and security. The attachment frame in EFT helps us to de-pathologize the defiant withdrawer's refusal to give in, for fear of losing him/herself, and the desperate pursuer's demands for his/her partner to change. Helping partners to co-create the safety to give and receive, to reach clearly and respond caringly, creates this circle of security in romantic relationships, and in turn creates parents who can build and nurture secure circles for their children.

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CIRCLE OF SECURITY

PARENT ATTENDING TO THE CHILD'S NEEDS

