

TTAC

NYC Early Childhood
Mental Health

Training and Technical Assistance Center



Listening In: Lessons in Early Relational Health from Infants and Caregivers

Presented by Claudia M. Gold, MD

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Who We Are

The New York City Early Childhood Mental Health Training and Technical Assistance Center (TTAC), is funded by the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH).

TTAC is a partnership between the New York Center for Child Development (NYCCD) and the McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research

- **New York Center for Child Development** has been a major provider of early childhood mental health services in New York with expertise in informing policy and supporting the field of Early Childhood Mental Health through training and direct practice
- **NYU McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research** houses the Community and Managed Care Technical Assistance Centers (CTAC & MCTAC), Peer TAC, and the Center for Workforce Excellence (CWE). These TA centers offer clinic, business, and system transformation supports statewide to all behavioral healthcare providers across NYS.

TTAC is tasked with building capacity and competencies of mental health professionals and early childhood professionals in family serving systems to identify and address the social-emotional needs of young children and their families.



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Objectives



- Understand the value of working from a stance of not-knowing.
- Recognize the perspective of infant, caregiver, relationship, and culture.
- Describe the role of mismatch and repair in healthy and derailed infant development.

From Pediatrics to Psychoanalysis to Early Relational Health

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CLAUDIA MEININGER GOLD

Mind-altering drugs and the problem child

By Claudia Meininger Gold
June 30, 2008

E-mail | Reprints | Text size - +

YOU'RE A young mother at the playground with your 3-year-old son. The other mothers are engaged in relaxed conversation, but you're on edge. You know your son is "inflexible," and at any moment could go from happily playing to a **tantrum**. (Full article: 699 words)

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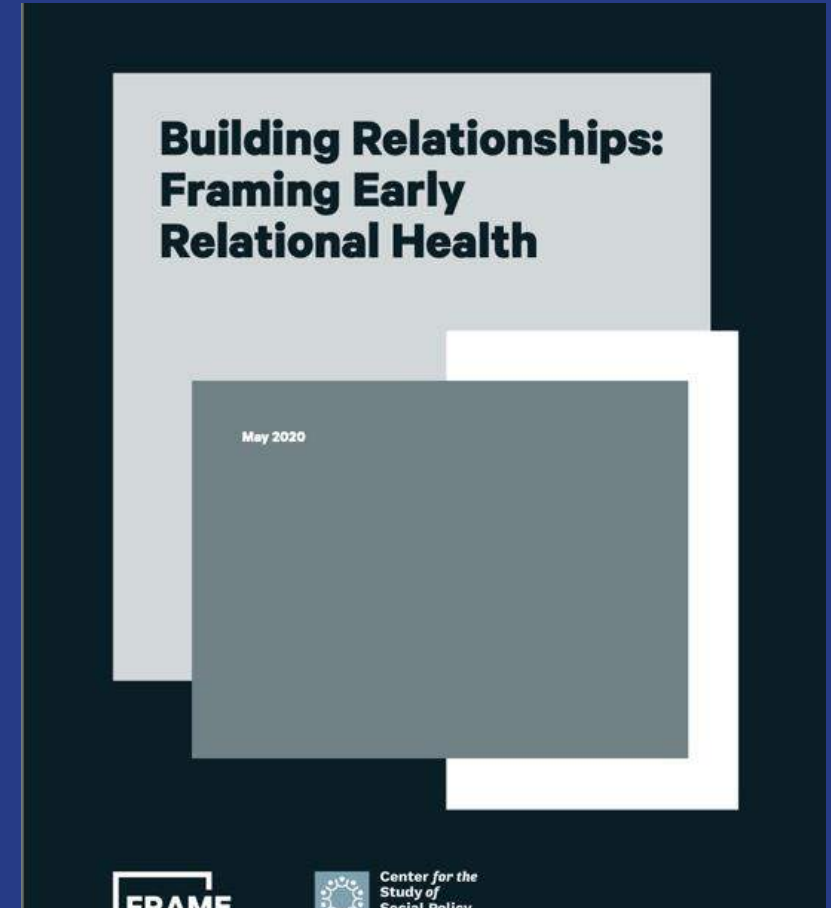
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- Pediatric Primary Care
- Berkshire Psychoanalytic Institute
- Infant Parent Mental Health/Early Relational Health

Early Relational Health

- “*Early relational health*, although a new term, does not designate a new field nor a series of new discoveries.
- Builds upon decades of research from the fields of child development, infant mental health, and neuroscience
- Centrality of relationships between caregivers and very young children for future health, development, and social-emotional wellbeing.”



Early Relational Health

- Infant-caregiver/parent, practitioner-infant, and practitioner-caregiver
- Roots laid down in relationships in the child's primary caregiving environment
- New relationships in a child's expanding social environment have potential to support and enhance a child's development

- Holding perspective of infant, caregiver, relationship and culture
- All in a frame of cultural humility and the not-knowing stance



- Each of us—given our unique life story and professional role—will have different levels of identification with, or concern for, these varied perspectives.
- Aim to integrate all the varied viewpoints to apply them together in a moment of interaction.
- Some have more salience than others to a particular moment, issue, or problem.

Overview

- The not-knowing stance
- The four perspectives
- Vignette
- Discussion

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from Teachers College Press



Getting to Know You

**Lessons in
Early
Relational
Health From
Infants and
Caregivers**

Claudia M. Gold, MD

Foreword by Junlei Li

Afterword by Lisa Matter and Hoda Shawky

Listening In: An Organizing Frame



- Listening with an intentional suspension of expectations and a willingness to be surprised
- In place of certainty, it embraces a humbleness of not knowing
- It calls for us to allow ourselves to feel awkward and uneasy— to make mistakes as we try to find our way into another person's experience.

Letting go of the “expert” stance

- As a pediatrician I was educated to see my role as to inform parents, advise parents, educate parents.
- But time and again this approach led to a feeling of frustration and failure.
- Both for myself and the families I was trying to help.

Playing in the Uncertainty

- Play as spontaneous, loosely organized behavior with no specified objective or consequence.
- Play is by nature uncertain.
- My very experience of not-knowing was the key that opened the door into a family's story.

Without Memory or Desire

- “The only point of importance in any session is the unknown. Nothing must be allowed to distract from intuiting that. In any session, evolution takes place. Out of the darkness and formlessness something evolves.”

Wilfred Bion

“ I do not wish to carry this attitude to absurd lengths”

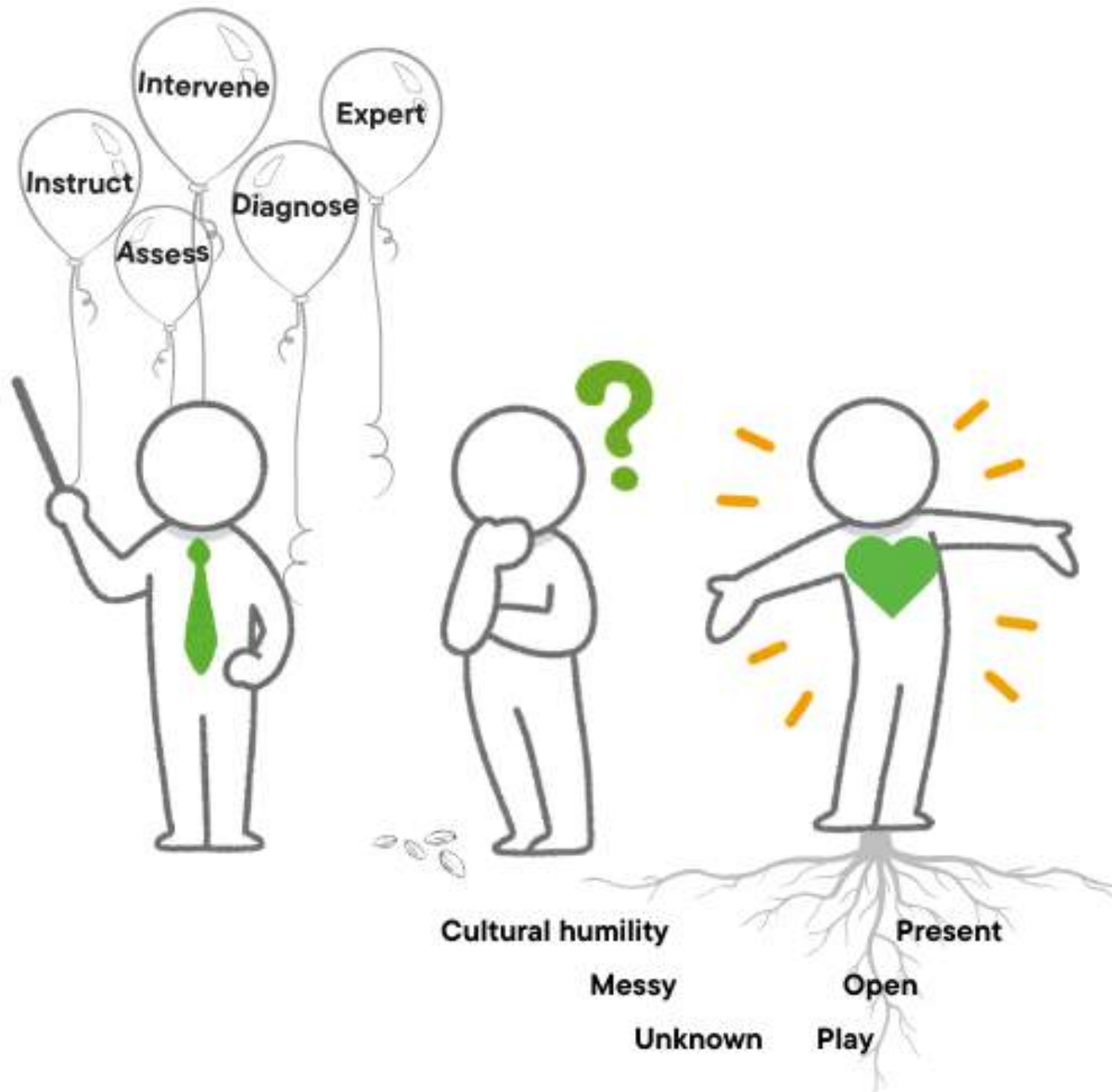
D. W. Winnicott

- Forms for housing, getting diapers, etc.



Not-knowing as our superpower!!!!

- The moments where we don't know what's going on, uncomfortable as they may be, are the ones that offer the most opportunity for connection, growth, and healing.



Caregiver-Infant Relationship: Prototype of Not-Knowing

- Newborn infants have a tremendous capacity to communicate purpose and intention.
- Babies have unique ways of moving and responding to their environment.
- Their cues can be subtle
- Caregivers frequently miss their infant's signals.



The Power of Not-Knowing

- The good news is that healthy development happens exactly because of these missed signals.
- As caregiver and infant move through misunderstanding to understanding, their connection deepens.
- At the same time a baby gets an increasingly clear and hopeful sense that “I am me!”

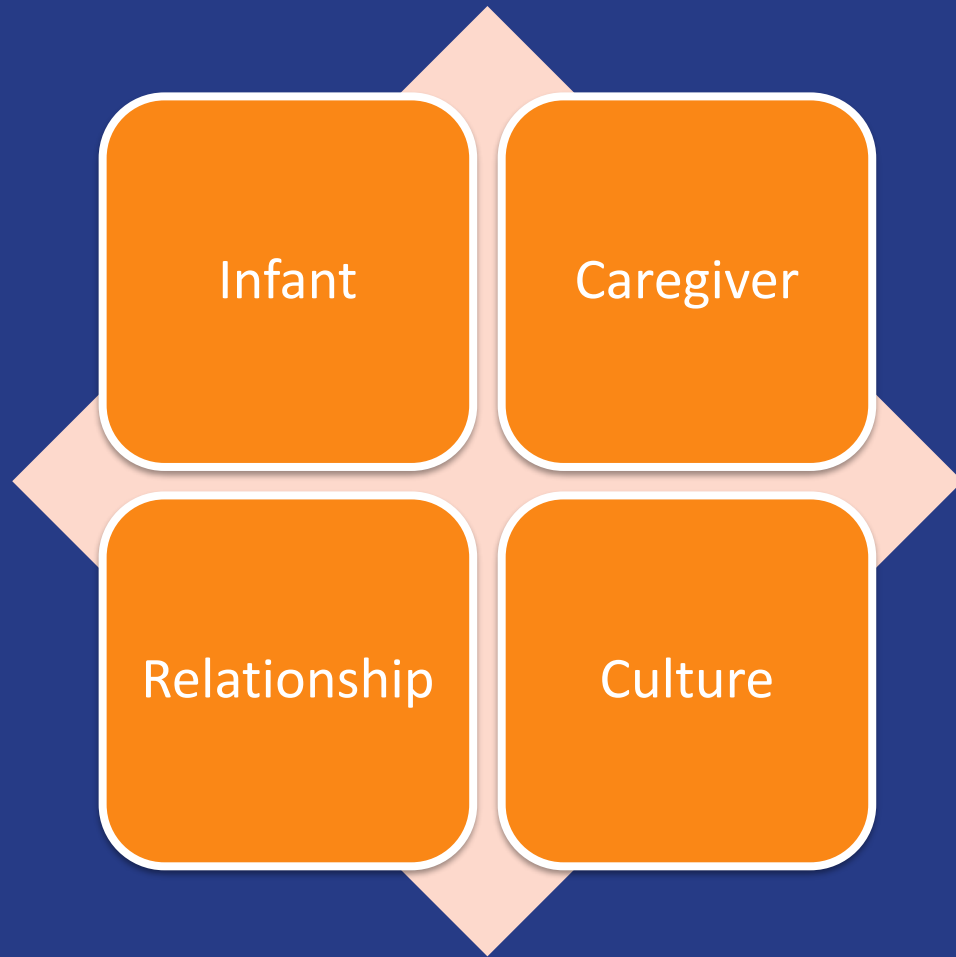
Cultural Humility and the Not-Knowing Stance

- The term “cultural humility,” first introduced in the healthcare world in 1998 is now taking a prominent role in the current reckoning with social justice
- In place of certainty, it embraces a humbleness of not knowing
- Recognize that even in sameness there is difference

Learning from Babies

- Cultural humility and early relational health united by core concept
- Stance of not-knowing
- Baby and caregiver as separate people get to know each other in messy- culturally embedded- process over time

Four Perspectives: A Sampler



- All four perspectives are embedded in the larger frame of cultural humility and the power of the not-knowing stance.

The Unique Human Newborn

- Completely helpless
- Highly social



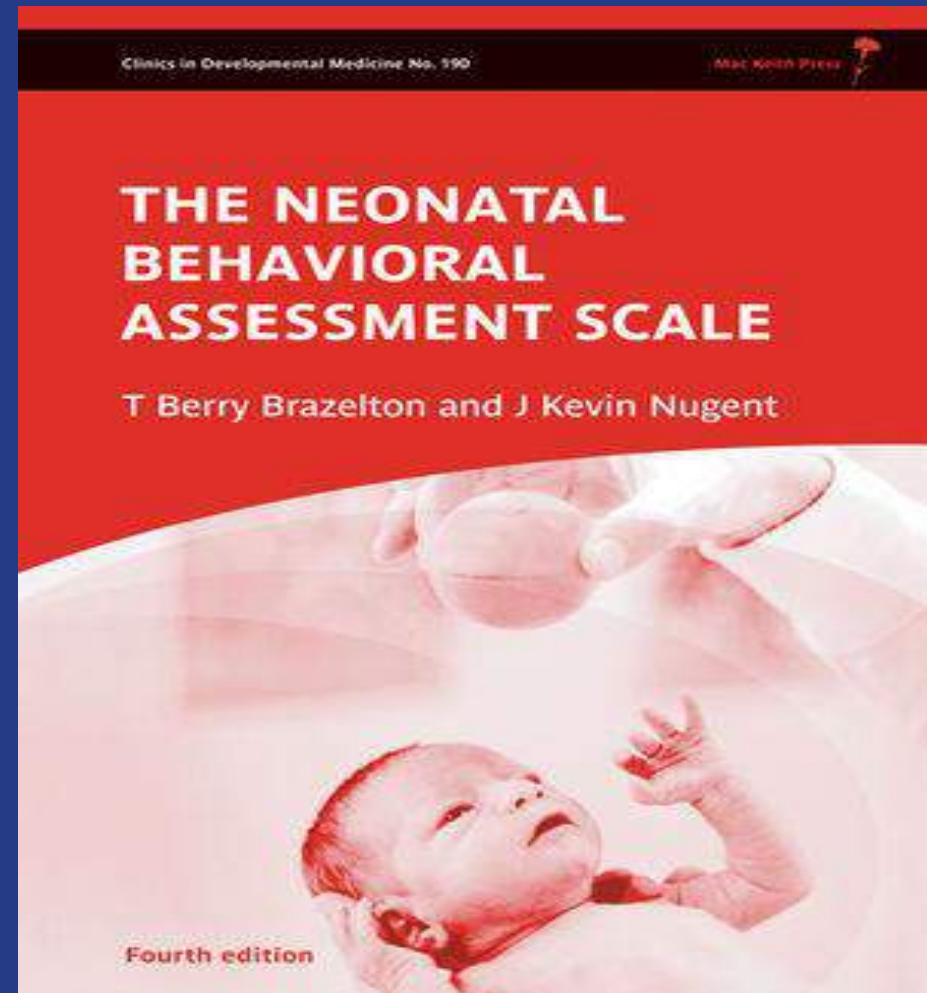
Learning from Brazelton

- “You’re such a little person already”
- “Stop, Look, Listen”



Listening For the Infant's Contribution

- Sensory processing
- State regulation



Sensory processing

- As Brazelton was among the first to describe, newborn infants show unique ways of processing their sensory experience.
- For example, Brazelton demonstrated how babies in a state of deep sleep have vastly different reactions to a rattle briefly but briskly shaken, or a light shone over their closed eyes.

Sensory Processing

- Greatly influenced by my colleagues in occupational therapy
- Whether a child was 2 months, 2 years, or even 20 years old—I would often discover variations in sensory processing with profound impact on the infant-parent relationship
- These differences often appear early, typically showing themselves in differences in feeding, sleeping, and crying behavior.

State Regulation

- Newborn infants have six unique states: deep sleep, active sleep, drowsy, awake and alert, fussy, and crying.
- Some babies transition smoothly from one to the other in a predictable organized way, while others may cry and cry only to suddenly fall into a deep sleep.
- These variations have significant impact on the caregiver's experience and on the relationship

Foundations of Lifelong Health are Built in Infancy

- Caregivers as baby brain builders
- Nature vs nurture: a modern perspective
- Early relationships influence all biological systems in the infant

Caregivers as baby brain builders

Three Core Concepts in Early Development

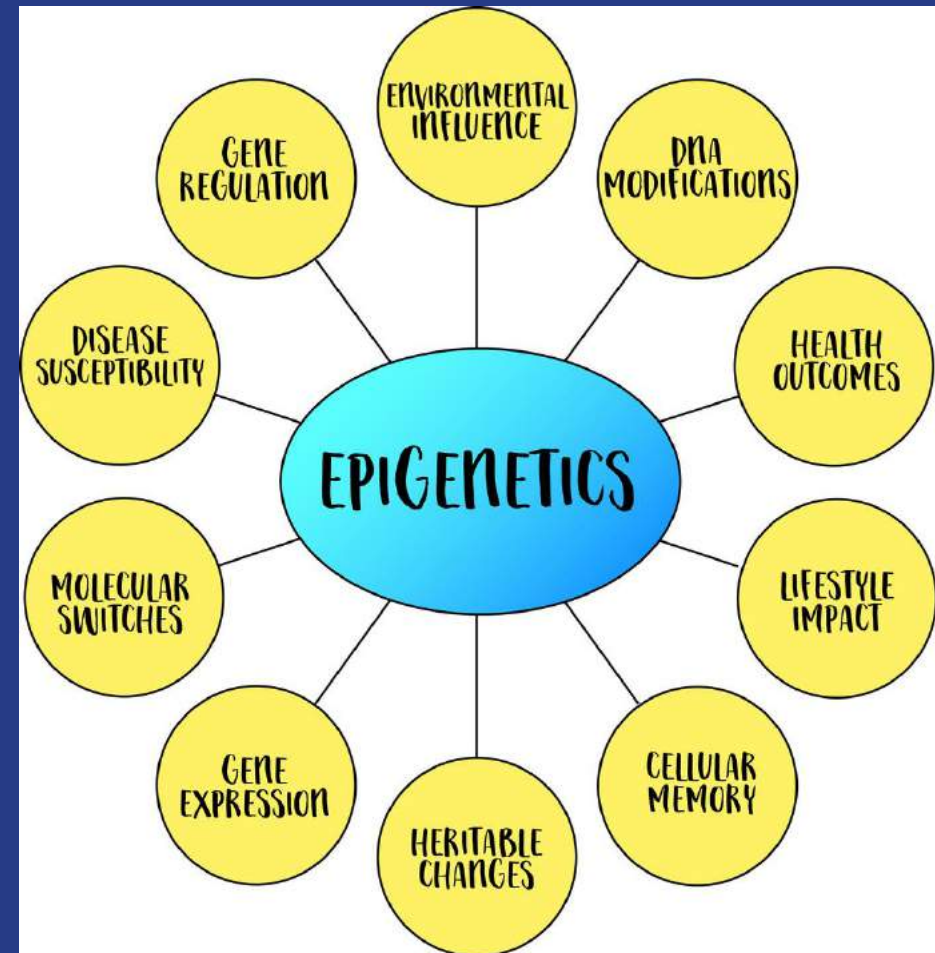
1 Experiences Build Brain Architecture

NATIONAL SCIENTIFIC COUNCIL ON THE DEVELOPING CHILD

Center on the Developing Child  HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Nature vs nurture: a modern perspective

- Epigenetics puts a whole new spin on the nature versus nurture debate, which has historically viewed genes and environment as separate, independent factors in determining an individual's development.
- Unlike the genome—a person's sequence of base pairs—the epigenome, or pattern of methylations, can change rapidly in response to the environment.
- An organism can continually change its gene expression without any change to the DNA sequence itself.

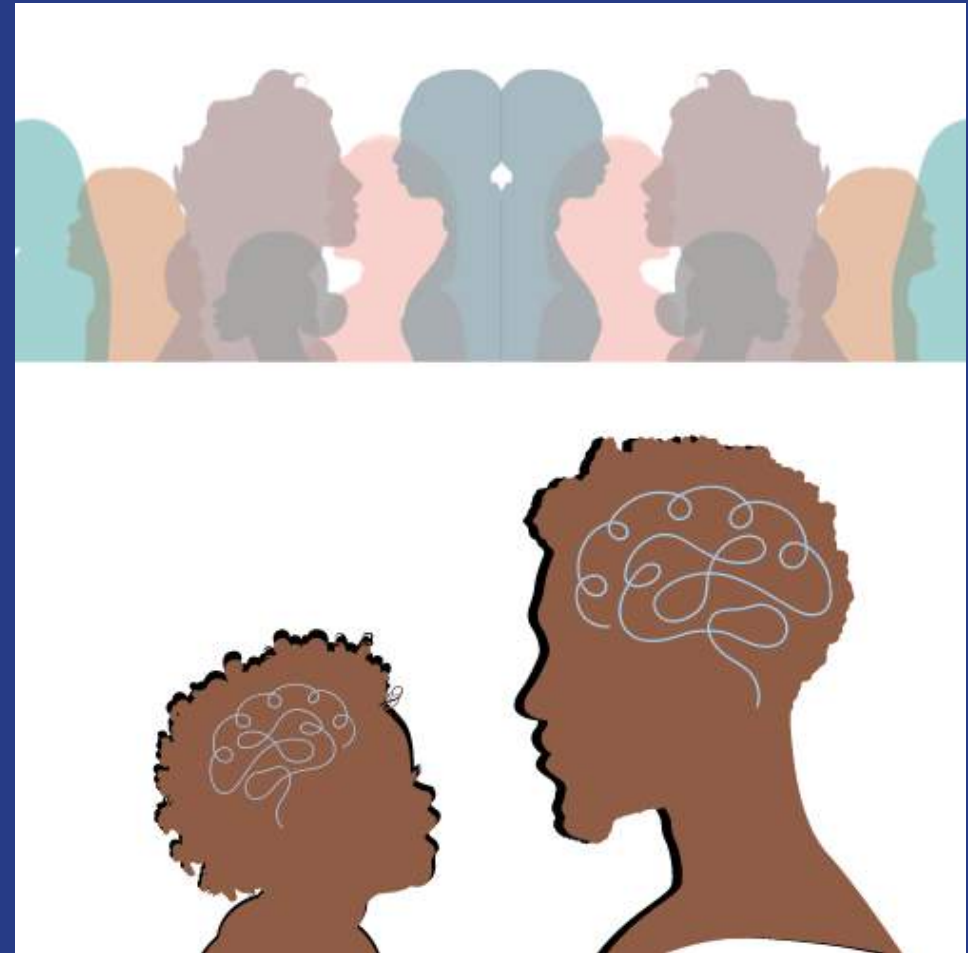


Early relationships influence all biological systems

- Different biological systems in the infant depend on each other and influence each other.
- The nervous system is the primary system to detect threat in the environment.
- The stress is communicated to the cardiovascular system, the immune system, the neuroendocrine system, and the metabolic system.

Changes to the Parent's brain

- Evidence that not only the infant's brain but also the mother's brain changes in the transition to parenthood. (Kim 2018)
- Recent study demonstrates changes to fathers' brains (Saxbe 2024)



The Caregiver



Listening to caregivers

- Creating safety
- Promoting reflective functioning
- Listening for loss

- “I came to recognize that young often children often “act out” as a way to communicate to their parent or caregiver: “I need you to deal with what is troubling you, so you are free to be with me.” When I started listening, I heard this message behind every “behavior problem” that brought parents to my office. “

From Getting to Know You

The dilemma of parent blaming

- In Western culture “parenting” has a competitive edge; a verb that describes something you do to your child.
- At the same time new parents are typically left with insufficient support in the perinatal period.
- These factors together create an environment in which parents are vulnerable to feeling blamed when things go wrong.

Guilt, blame, and responsibility

- The not-knowing superpower—free from judgement or blame— serves to create a sense of trust.
- In turn, families open the door into a story that give meaning to the situation.

From Shame to Compassion



- A sense of shame in the parenting role can be experienced as threatening.
- A physiological response to threat leads caregivers to shut down, closing them off from the healing power of connection.
- “The feeling of safety is the treatment”

Stephen Porges, PhD

Listening to caregivers

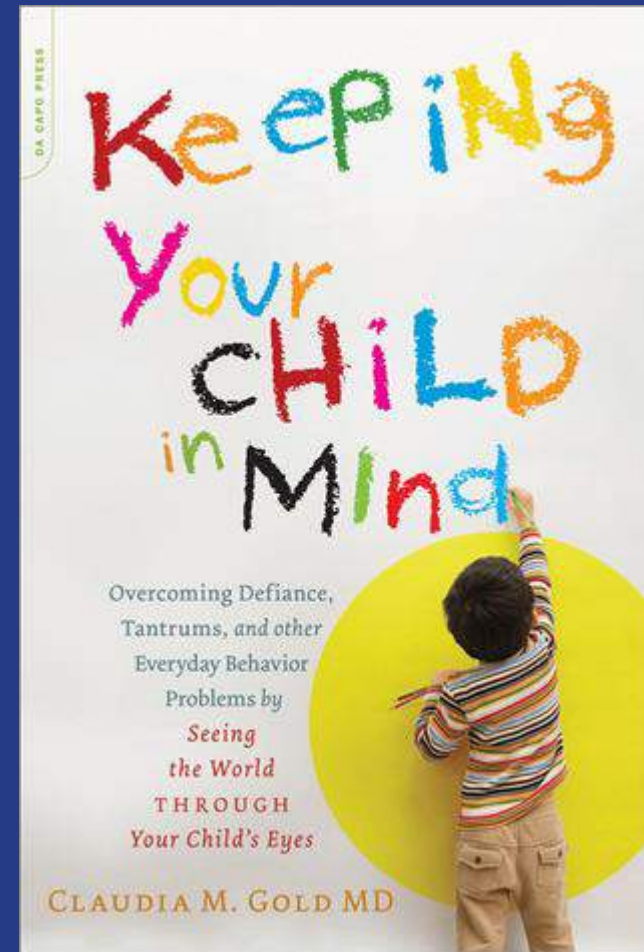
- Creating safety
- **Promoting reflective functioning**
- Listening for loss

Mentalization/Reflective functioning

- Uniquely human ability to attribute motivations and intentions to other's behavior
- The shift in the caregiver from “I know” to “I wonder”—from certainty to curiosity
- Being “held in mind” promotes child's capacity for regulation of emotion, social competence, and flexible thinking

Holding a Child in Mind

- Curiosity
- Empathy
- Containment
- Self-regulation



Facilitating Parental Reflective Functioning

- Holding parent in mind supports holding infant in mind
- Containing parent's experience supports containing infant's experience
- Listening to parent promotes listening to child

What gets in the way?

- Adversity, trauma, and loss impede a caregiver's capacity for reflective functioning. .
- Three interrelated concepts
- Describe life experiences that disrupt development and exert negative impact on a family's health and wellbeing.

Listening to caregivers

- Creating safety
- Promoting reflective functioning
- **Listening for loss**



Suspend
expectation,
Be open
to surprise

Replace
certainty
with a humble
not knowing

Be willing to
make mistakes,
feel awkward and
uneasy

Listening In

to find our way to another person's experience

“Listening in” supports grieving process

- “Listening in” at its essence calls for a willingness to be surprised.
- That surprise in my clinical practice typically appears in the form of an unexpected and unexpressed well of grief.
- All at once a coherent adult narrative would be ruptured by a cracking of the voice in an effort to suppress the pain.
- I hold space for the loss, letting parents express grief without feeling the need to interfere or reassure.

Through Mourning to Connection

- The most important item in my office is a box of tissues, placed within easy reach.
- Interrupting the conversation, even just to hand them a tissue, can shut them down.
- I feel safe playing in uncertainty, knowing that if things get messy, tissues will be close at hand



Elsa and George



- “The cure for the pain is the pain”

Muslim Sufi poet Rumi

The Relationship



Infant and caregiver influence and change each other in moment-by-moment interactions over time.

This microscopic interactive process embeds meaning in the child's body and brain well before they develop the capacity for language and thought

Marcela and Lucia

- 4-week-old infant
- Volunteer clinic serving uninsured, mostly undocumented immigrants from Central and South America
- Observation
- Story
- “She resists sleep”



"Lively and riveting... Human connections have the power to heal by engaging us in a new set of moment-to-moment mismatches... as long as we are open to repair and reconnect."

—Bessel van der Kolk, MD, author of *The Body Keeps the Score*

THE POWER OF DISCORD



WHY THE UPS AND DOWNS OF
RELATIONSHIPS ARE THE SECRET TO BUILDING
INTIMACY, RESILIENCE, AND TRUST

Ed Tronick, PhD, and Claudia M. Gold, MD

Repair Theory of Human Development

- Healthy relationships are characterized not by perfect attunement but by a messy process of mismatch and repair
- This continuous process builds resilience and trust
- The capacity for both self-regulation and intimacy grow from moment-to-moment interactions in our earliest relationships.
- These experiences change our brain and body, organizing the way we function in new relationships throughout our lives

Precursor: The “good-enough” mother

"I would rather be the child of a mother who has all the inner conflicts of the human being than be mothered by someone for whom all is easy and smooth, who knows all the answers, and is a stranger to doubt."

D.W.Winnicott

“While the concept of the “good-enough mother” often gets translated into simplistic, quick reassurance about being OK with mistakes, it reflects a more profound truth. Imperfections are necessary for healthy development.”

The Power of Discord

Repair Theory: Implications

- Early interactions lacking in robust repair may lead to emotional suffering and derailed development
- New sets of relationships with different quality of interactions can promote healing and growth throughout the lifespan

Evidence: Still-face paradigm



The still-face paradigm

- At first viewing, the still-face experiment can generate worry, pain, and fear as we are moved by the infant's experience of loss.
- The primary message of the still-face is one of hope.
- The baby communicates in her quick recovery that this experience of mismatch, while magnified and dramatic in the experiment, is familiar to her.
- She knows what to do to engage her mother. She has done this many times before but in ways that went unnoticed.

The 70-30 Discovery

- Frame-by-frame analysis of videos of typical infant-caregiver dyads offered a window into the moment-to-moment interactions that one could not appreciate in real time.
- Tronick expected to see healthy mother-infant pairs in perfect attunement, meeting each other's gaze, turning away from each other at the same time, reaching for each other in sync
- But after months of research, the actual pattern was undeniable In typical healthy parent-infant pairs, as many as 70 percent of the interactions were out of sync. Disconnection was an inevitable part of the interaction.

The Power of Repair

- Repair leads to a feeling of pleasure, trust, and security, the implicit knowledge that *“I can overcome problems.”*
- Repair teaches a critical life lesson: The negative feeling that arises from a mismatch can be changed into a positive feeling when two people subsequently achieve a match.
- Countless repairs build a core sense of agency and hope.

Repair Theory and Reflective Functioning

- The caregiver and baby each have their own set of meanings, intentions, and motivations.
- In the process of moving from mismatch to repair they discover new meanings together.
- Their connection strengthens and deepens.

Atypical Experience of Repair

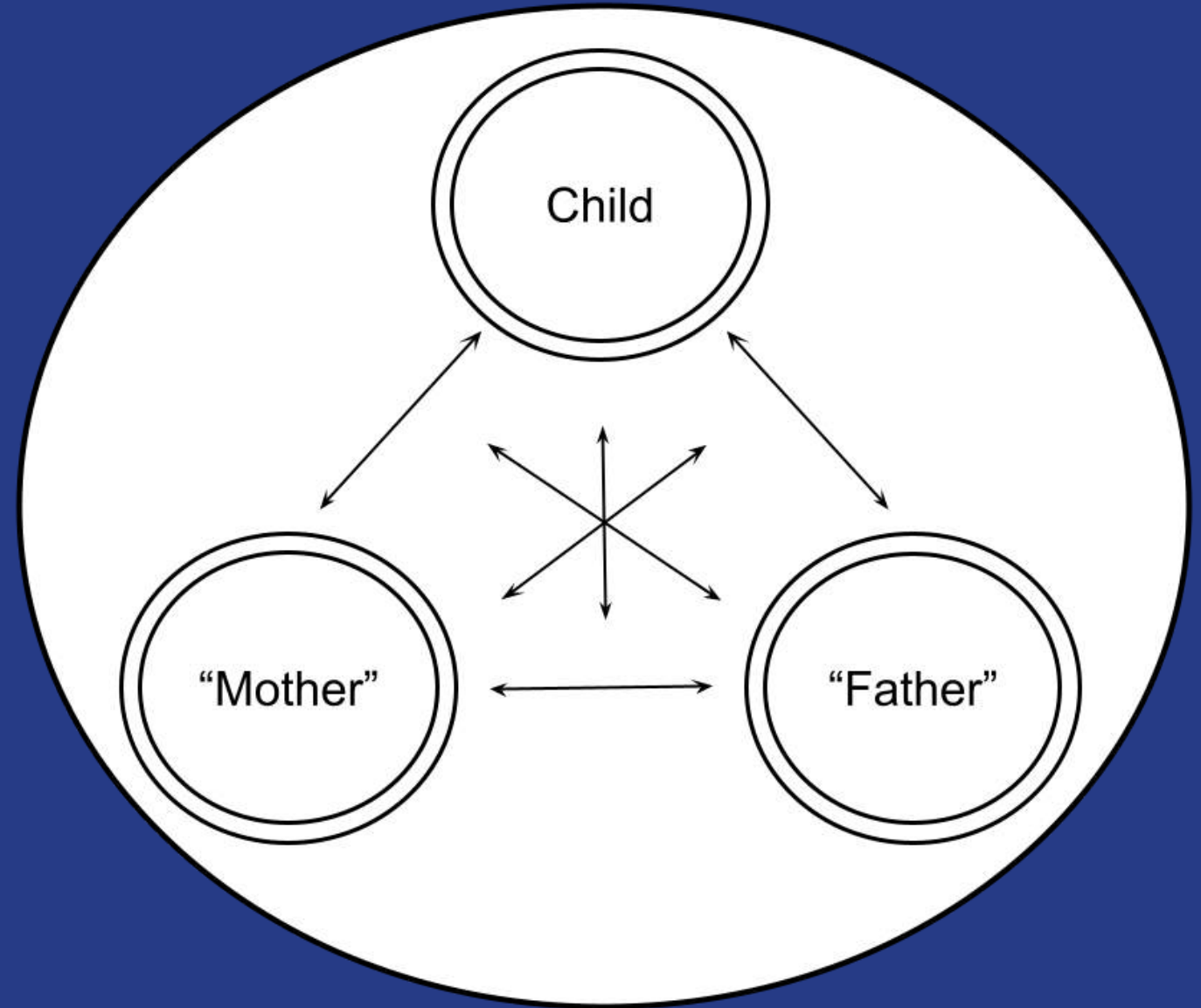
- Caregiver factors
- Infant factors
- Distorted meanings of hopelessness and fear

Early Experience is not “Baked in the Cake”

- New relationships with ample opportunity for mismatch and repair create new meanings that change our brain and body across the lif.espan



Beyond the Dyad



Kyle Pruett, MD

Beyond the Triad

- The primary triangle of two co-parents with one shared child.
- The model can be used to open up relationships within the extended family—including siblings—that have formative influence on children's development.
- Multigenerational influences are common in many non-Western cultures

Culture

- A set of shared activities, values, goals, and practices—that is, a common way of being in the world.
- “A system that enables the accumulation and transmission of a body of shared techniques and practices. “

Peter Fonagy



Culture

- Culture of historical trauma
- Culture of parental care
- Culture of mental healthcare

Historical Trauma

“Historical trauma functions as a public narrative for particular groups or communities that connects present-day experiences and circumstances...

The trauma narrative itself functions as a form of culture, tying personal experience to experience of the group”

Mohatt 2014

Historical trauma is alive in the present.

- Racism
- War
- Covid-19

- “The massive disparities in illness and death in Black and White populations from Covid-19 exposed in unrelenting clarity the epigenetic effects of historical and ongoing structural racism.
- In a kind of macabre experiment, all at once the entire world was exposed to the same invisible threat, revealing the unique vulnerabilities in marginalized and oppressed populations.
- It is important to note that these are effects not of race but of historical and ongoing structural racism.”

From Getting to Know You

My Back Story

- My family's ghosts were murdered in the Russian pogroms of the early 1900s and gas chambers of Germany in the 1940s, but they never discussed loss. As my ghosts were transformed into ancestors, I grew to recognize how my parents protected themselves from unfathomable grief by insisting that "everything is OK." For them, this stance was adaptive.
- But for me as a child I felt perpetually in the dark, unable to manage my feelings of worry, anger, or sadness. Sensing from my parents that the full range of my emotions were not acceptable, I lived with an almost unbearable existential anxiety that I could not be my full self.
- Not wanting other children to experience this kind of pain, I have made it my life's work to offer a safe space for families to play in the uncertainty and speak the unspeakable. Together, we can tear down the façade that "everything is OK." Once parents can share and release their own grief, they can better hear their children. And by being heard, a child can fully blossom.

Historical Trauma and the Not-Knowing Stance

- When as an adult I recognized the need to seek professional help, the first person I saw, after I shared a brief description of myself as a child of a Holocaust survivor, told me that as a Jew he had a special interest in the subject.
- His claim of expertise, with the assumption that he could know something about me based on this one shared identity, precipitated a profound visceral feeling of loneliness that I still can conjure up after more than twenty years
- I fled as fast as I could, filled with anger and a disturbing sense of invisibility.
- Fortunately, a colleague then recommended this new therapist, who didn't assume to understand my experience. While he was not one to self-disclose, perhaps as part of my own healing process I gave him, based on his last name, attributions of non-Jewish German heritage. Over a decade after I had ended therapy—for the purposes of my new book—he confirmed my impression.

From Getting to Know You

The culture of parental care

- Nelson Mandela famously said, “There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children (Mandela 1995).”
- A more accurate statement is “how it treats parents and other caregivers of infants.”
- The way a society treats its caregivers directly impacts the physical and emotional health of subsequent generations.

Early Relational Health and Material Hardship

- Caregivers preoccupied with worries about diapers, housing, food, and other “material hardships”
- Challenging to be present for moment-by-moment mismatch and repair that serves as the foundation of healthy relationships and development.
- “Material hardship is bad for early relational health”

Dr. Philip Fisher, RAPID survey project

Policy implications

- Paid parental leave
- Child tax credit
- Quality affordable childcare
- Early relational health integrated into primary care

Culture of Early Relational Health Care

- “Culturally, we tend to place people in convenient boxes: easy or difficult, normal or abnormal, healthy or sick.
- We have pathologized all forms of emotional suffering. But suffering is not a “disorder.” It is part of the human condition.
- And the expression of that suffering is often a call to be heard, loved, and acknowledged.”

From Getting to Know You

Listening to the Workforce

- We need to value (emotionally and financially) the workforce that supports early relational health in proportion to their role in promoting the health and wellbeing of the next generation.

Reflective Practice

- Reflective supervision offers a space for practitioners where it is safe to speak not only of accomplishments but also doubts and mistakes.
- It provides opportunity to process emotionally charged interactions, with a focus on experiences, thoughts, and feelings directly connected with the work.

- Families are significantly more likely to remain in a home visiting program if the home visitor receives monthly supervision.
- “The implication is that supervision may change something within the provider that leads to better perceptions and more engagement on the part of families.”

Ghosh-Ippen 2019

Not-Knowing and Reflective Practice

- “Containing the impulse to speak before fully exploring and understanding—letting the process unfold and withholding suggestions, interpretations, and conclusions that may shortcut the process.”

Mary Claire Heffron, PhD

Case

- Reflective supervision with home visitor
- 6-month-old former 29 weeker
- “Only sleeps on me”
- Starting childcare in one month
- Awkward, anxious



Finding Hope

- We've travelled from the perspective of the individual infant, to that of the caregiver, to the relationship, and then to the larger social and cultural context.
- In conclusion, I'm going to shift our view back to high magnification.
- The baby brings us fully into the present moment

Moment of Meeting

- Moment when infant and caregiver feel fully recognized
- A moment in time in an evolving process of missed cues and miscommunication in search of a new moment of meeting



Moments of Meeting

- No matter how messy the situation, a singular focus on facilitating moments of connection brings a sense of calm purpose to the work.
- Such moments can produce extraordinary changes, shifting the narrative from anger and disconnection to possibility for healing and growth.

Resisting Certainty

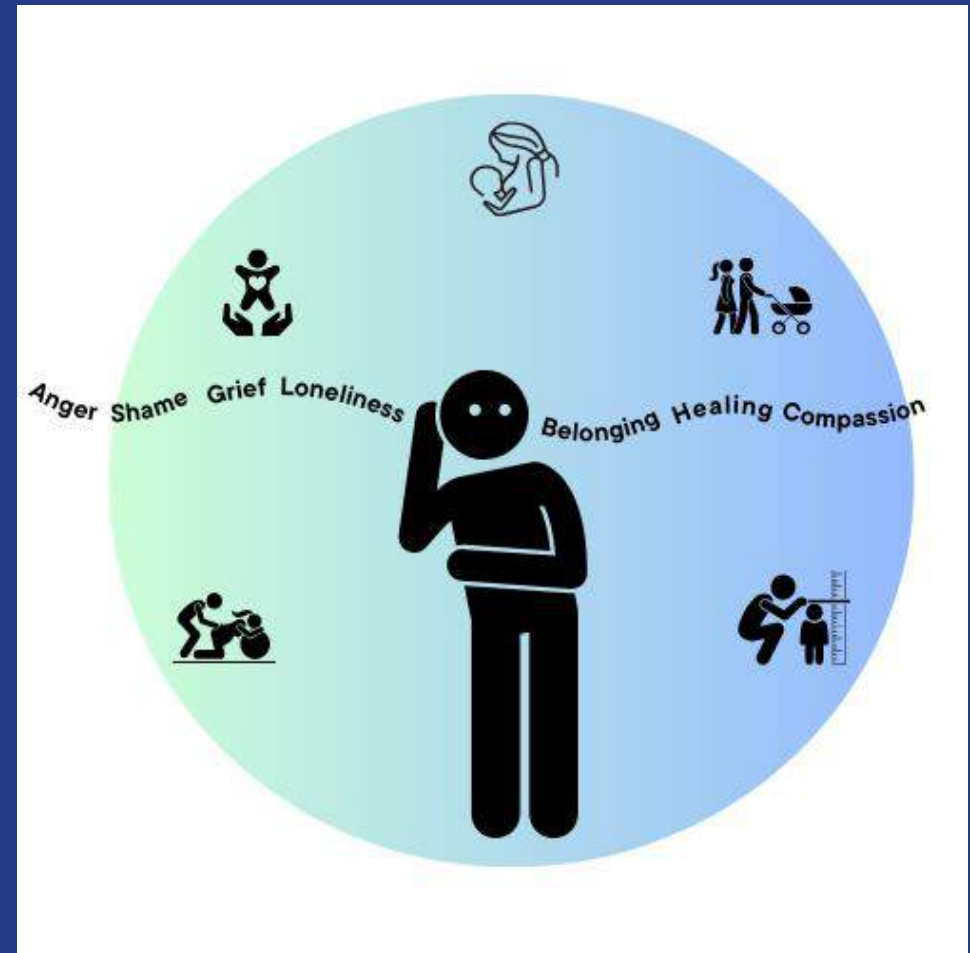
- Each moment is precious—best not squandered with the certainty of "instruction" or "management."
- These actions all may function in the short term to protect us from taking in the other's distress; from becoming overwhelmed ourselves by the struggles we encounter.

- But the opposite is true.
- When we open ourselves to not-knowing, each interaction can produce this same transformative energy, creating a renewed sense of hope



Conclusion

- When we move through messy moments in interactions with others, letting ourselves be in the uncomfortable times when we don't quite know what's going on, we learn to trust each other.
- When we give ourselves grace to play in the uncertainty, we discover that when things go wrong, as they inevitably do, together we will find a way to reconnect.
- With each repair we grow and change, over time building a better world.



Thank you



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