

The FIT/UCE Employee Assistance Program

Facts and Tips for: Stopping the Blame and Improving Relationships

- 1) Remember **everyone** wants to feel safe, secure and attached to a loved one from birth onward.
- 2) Earliest ways we have attached to caregivers and them to us sets the stage for later relationships in life. Experiences in these relationships encode in the neural circuitry of our brains by 12-18 months outside of our conscious awareness.
- 3) Current neuroscience, especially in the last 14 years, has shown the neuroplasticity of the brain and that **new experiences create new neural pathways. The past does not have to be the present.**
- 4) Some facts about parts of the brain
 - a) Amygdala is the core of emotional learning and interactive social processing. It gets activated when it feels threat or danger and goes into flight or fight mode automatically. It goes into a self-defensive mode assessing whether something or somebody is friend or foe. As Mona Fishbane, Ph.D. noted couples therapist, states in her book, *Loving with the Brain in Mind*, “In evolutionary terms, since it developed before the prefrontal cortex, it is located lower or deeper in the brain than the PFC and often leads to an impulsive response.”
 - b) Prefrontal cortex – is the part of the brain that is more highly developed. It mediates cognition, reasoning, flexibility, self-regulation, moral behavior and empathy. Activated in the baby’s brain at around 10-12 months, growth continues throughout life. This is the part of the brain that tries to make sense of things that happen and seeks to explain our experience to our self and others.
- 5) The “survival strategies and habits” from early childhood are reflected in our neural structures. We all have trillions of cells and 110 billion gray matter in our brain. Brain cells communicate with each other through something called synapses. Neurotransmitters are constantly being fired through this synaptic field. Repeated experiences cause neurons to fire repeatedly. Neurons that “fire together wire together.” Strong neural connections become neural pathways.
- 6) Fear triggers attachment behaviors. If attachment is threatened in some way – e.g., a fight occurs between you and partner, amygdala is activated and older more maladaptive patterns arise and responses are immediate. Then the prefrontal cortex “jumps in” to try to explain to yourself and partner why things happened. But since both parties might be feeling threatened and unsafe, characteristic patterns to justify responses occur.

- 7) Need to create more “positive ways” to adapt when feeling threatened which will then create new neural pathways. Then these new neural pathways will be wired and fired together the next time a difficult period or situation arises.
- 8) Secure attachment soothes the fear of the amygdala and provides opportunity for exploration. Empathy, bonding and reflection regulate fear, anxiety, and shame. When this occurs, the firing of the amygdala is soothed.
- 9) Knowing yourself, your attachment style from early on to present is essential in breaking this negative cycle. Asking yourself some key questions like:
 - What were your experiences with early caregivers and loved ones like? Could you depend upon them? If there were disappointments how did you learn to cope? If you don’t remember or know, what have your more recent experiences been when your security or safety in a relationship has been threatened?
- 10) Hormonal Aspect of Brain-Body Communication
 1. Cortisol – Hormone of stress response. Help muscles get ready for flight or fight response. Affects brain development, immune system, memory and cognition.
 2. Oxytocin- An antidote to cortisol. Released with orgasm, birth, nursing, massage, touch and empathy. Lowers blood pressure, helps with wound healing and is key in the process of bonding, attachment, trust and generosity. Need to find ways to nurture and get the oxytocin flowing. Then sense of feeling safe, more attached and loving can follow.
- 11) Action plan for improving relationship
 1. With knowledge of your attachment style, what are your emotional triggers, and what sets you off? Do you feel abandoned, criticized, alone, nagged, rejected; nothing you do is right, good enough? Is this a familiar feeling you have had in your life or that you have seen in your familial history? Who treated you this way in the past?
 2. Identify the **process** of what occurs between you and partner. **Do Not** only identifies what your partner does. Examples:
 - What to say** – “When I try to tell you what I am feeling, I feel like you tune me out and don’t listen.”
 - Do not say** – “You never listen to me.”
 3. Remind yourself that everyone has needs and fears. How we express them is the problem – the process is the “monster” not necessarily your partner.
 4. What are the “stories” you have told yourself about yourself and your partner? Is it “I’ll never get what I want,” or “Nothing I will do will be good enough?” What new story can you tell yourself? This is the time to become the “director” of your story.
 5. Honestly identify what feelings and behaviors is **your** immediate response to feeling threatened. Devise **in advance** an **alternative** response. For example how might you calm yourself next time you are feeling “activated”? Counting to ten, taking some deep breaths, telling yourself not to respond immediately, are some possibilities.
 6. Practice in advance breath work so that your system gets to a relaxed place more quickly. Remember you are trying to develop new neural pathways and new experiences.

7. Once you are in a calmer space, what are better ways to communicate your concerns? “I” statements facilitate a more open space for listening.
8. Both of you should write “relational purpose statement” – how would you like relationship to look? Each individual needs to write specific behaviors and skills that they can commit to practicing to achieve this goal.
Statement example: “I want a loving relationship where my partner listens to me and responds to my needs.”
Specific behaviors and skills:
 - a. Need to ask in direct non-attacking way and if not given, need to express underlying feelings, fears, and anger in a non-attacking way.
 - b. Need to pick appropriate time and place to ask for it.
 - c. Need to consider other alternative reasons other than “story” I’ve told myself about why I’m not getting what I want. For instance, maybe my partner feels inadequate, or is frightened.
9. Ask your partner what their reaction is to your request. Then repeat back to them what you heard them say before responding in a defensive manner – i.e., telling them they shouldn’t feel that way, interrupting or trying to explain what you said. Time for clarification of what you meant can come later.
10. What is it that you loved about them initially? List three things or more. Set up a time to go over list with partner.
11. List three things that you know your partner struggles with. For example – self-esteem if they had a critical parent, or feeling overly responsible if they had an absent caregiver through alcoholism, drugs, mental illness, or abandonment issues if a parent left, died, or was never there. Write down how you think it might have made them feel, or if they have told you, write that down. Read it, take in the emotional impact. Whereas once you might have been more empathetic but time, problems, and your needs not being met, may have eroded that empathy, let it resurface. And if you never were empathetic, ask yourself why not? Just because you may have reacted differently doesn’t make their response wrong or any less real to them.
12. Be **curious** instead of **judgmental** of both yourself and your partner. What are the processes that have occurred? Why do you respond in the way you do? Learn to ask questions of yourself even if you “think” you know the answers already. You may or not be right, and it can be a wonderful opportunity for clarification and possible change.
13. What do you get from needing to be “right” all the time? What do you feel like you lose by considering the possibility that you may not be?
14. Identify two things that might interfere with your being able to change your characteristic ways of responding and changing the dysfunctional process. Write down specifically what you will do to counteract this longstanding and entrenched pattern.
15. Remember that sometimes as hard as you may try to do things differently, there may be difficulties that you cannot resolve without professional help. Please remember that the FIT/UCE EAP is available for confidential assistance and can be reached at 212-217-5600.