

Getting to Know You:

Lessons in Early Relational Health from Infants and Caregivers

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Objectives/Overview

- Recognize the value of working with families from a stance of not-knowing
- Understand the role of mismatch and repair in healthy and derailed infant development
- Apply the repair theory of human development to clinical work with infants and caregivers



Tania and Calvin

- 2- year-old boy with “excessive tantrums”
- Overdose death of father
- “Tell me what to do to make him listen”



Way of Being

- Just as parents are experts with respect to their unique child, you are the expert with regards to your unique professional role and work setting.
- Rather than offering instruction, I hope to offer an approach— rooted in contemporary developmental science— that will be useful in whatever circumstances you find yourself in interaction with infants and caregivers.



Letting go of the “expert” stance

In my education as a pediatrician the medical model led me 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

As I was introduced to a world of research and knowledge typically siloed from pediatricians, I discovered the value of what I call “playing in the uncertainty.”

Play—broadly conceived as spontaneous, loosely organized behavior with no specified objective or consequence—is by nature uncertain.

I found that my very experience of not-knowing was the key that opened the door into a family’s story.



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.

THE SILENCED CHILD

From Labels,
Medications,
and Quick-Fix
Solutions
to Listening,
Growth, and
Lifelong
Resilience

CLAUDIA
M. GOLD, MD



- Certainty offers a way to manage stress and anxiety, but can silence voice of both infant and caregiver



Not-knowing as your 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 growth and healing

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

D. W. Winnicott

- Forms for housing, getting diapers, etc.

Listening in as developmental process over time

- Caregiver –infant
- Practitioner-Caregiver
- Teacher-student



Caregiver-Infant Relationship: Prototype of Not-Knowing

- Newborn infants have a tremendous capacity to communicate purpose and intention. Their survival depends on it.
- From their first breath, babies have unique ways of moving and responding to their environment.
- Their cues can be subtle and caregivers who are often overwhelmed by multiple stressors, including the exhaustion that comes with being a new parent, 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 parent 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!”



Connection and Belonging

The ability to find a way into another person's experience begins to develop in the earliest months

Caregivers naturally respond to their infant's wordless communication, giving shape to an emerging sense of self.

The early experience of being seen and heard builds a primary feeling of connection and belonging.

Cultural Humility and the Not-Knowing Stance

- The term “cultural humility,” first introduced in the healthcare world in 1998 and 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





Lessons 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

Learning from Brazelton

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

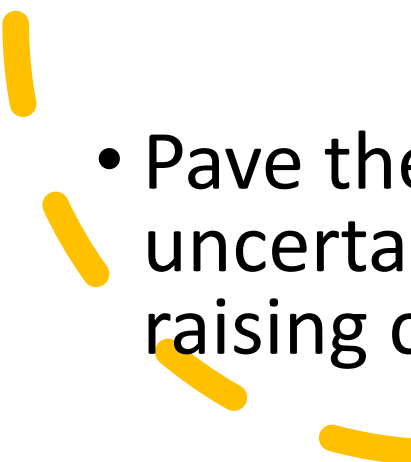


Listening to Caregivers

- To listen to their baby in this way, parents and other caregivers need to feel heard and supported.
- With the confidence that comes from that scaffolding, they can engage their natural intuition, staying present to work through the messy moments of not knowing exactly what to do.
- By listening to their baby from a stance of flexibility and curiosity, not always “getting” what the baby is communicating, caregivers pave the way for their child’s ability to tolerate the uncertainty that is inherent in all social interaction.



Practitioner-Caregiver Relationship

- Trust emerges from the typical messy process of getting to know each other
 - Listen to a client from a stance of flexibility and curiosity, not always “getting” what the caregiver is communicating
 - Pave the way for the family’s ability to tolerate the uncertainty that is inherent in the developmental process of raising children
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My story

Pediatrics

Berkshire Psychoanalytic
Institute

Keeping Your Child In Mind

Infant Parent Mental
Health/Early Relational Health



**Fellowship in
Early Relational Health**

**Department of Psychiatry
Lifeline for Families Center**



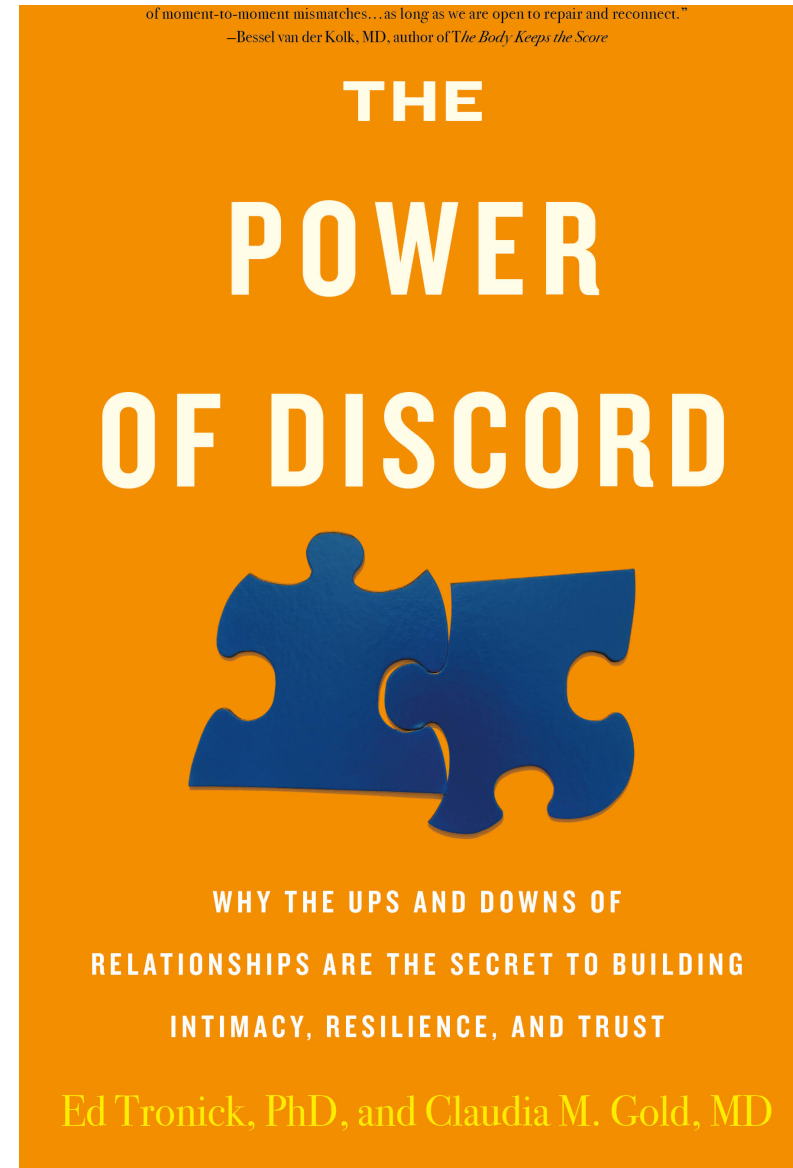
Information:

<https://www.umassmed.edu/lifelineforfamilies/ERH/>

Contact us:

Email: ERH@umassmed.edu

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- Collaborative effort with Ed Tronick
 - Filled with mismatch and repair
 - Selected concepts



Discovery of Repair Theory

- “As the field of pediatrics exploded with diagnoses of ADHD and the newly discovered pediatric bipolar disorder, I experimented with creating a space for families to move from disconnection to reconnection.
- In part, this change was concrete. I started reserving fifty minutes for an appointment rather than the standard thirty and saw families in a larger, more comfortable office. I recognized that the amount of time for the visit and the safety of the physical space played a critical role.
- As I shifted from asking questions and giving advice to simply listening, frequently sitting on the floor with younger children, I saw families move from anger and disconnection, sometimes through deep sadness, and then to moments of reconnection. A young child would spontaneously run into their mother’s arms to receive a hug. Often, I felt a tingling in my arms, and my eyes filled with tears in the presence of rediscovered joy and love.”

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.



Source: Michael Jr. Productions . Listen to Your Father

Breakout Discussion Questions

- What do you notice about the infant's behavior?
- What do you notice about the dad's behavior?
- What do you notice about the relationship?



Repair Theory: Treatment 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

Stopping the blame game

- Unfortunately, recognizing the significance of relationships in making sense of behavior frequently gets translated into blaming parents.
- While a particular problem may be located in one person — for example, an infant's relative prematurity and difficulty settling — the caregiver's response to the problem becomes part of their relationship.
- A more constructive approach begins with accepting that when relationships falter, individuals will struggle.

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



Evidence: The Still Face Paradigm

Still-face paradigm



Breakout discussion questions

- What do you notice about the baby's behavior
 - In typical play
 - during the still-face episode
 - after the still-face episode
- What meaning do you make of your observations?

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

Tronick began by videotaping typical parent-infant interactions. In subsequent frame-by-frame analysis of these videos, he slowed down the tape, gaining a window into the moment-to-moment interactions that one could not appreciate in real time.

He 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, and in general matching each other's every move.

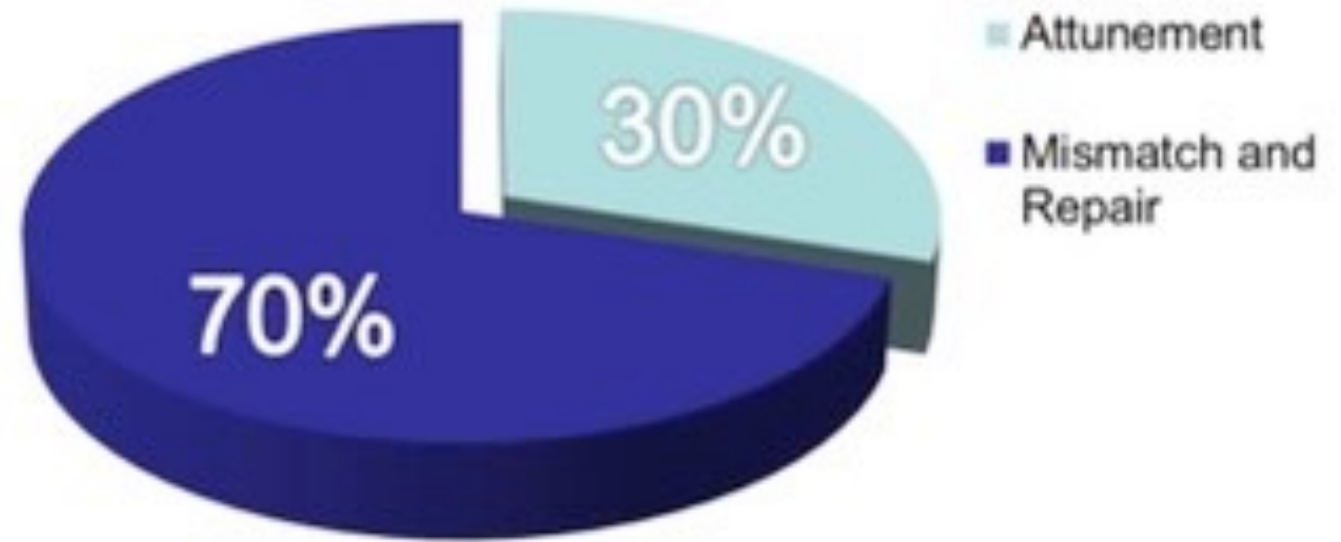
But after months of research, the actual pattern was undeniable.

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 70-30 Discovery

- These findings have been replicated in research over decades in a wide variety of settings and applications

**Mismatch is the norm.
Relationships are achieved not assumed.**



Tronick, E. Z., & Gianino, A. (1985). Interactive mismatch and repair: Challenges to the coping infant. *Zero to Three*, 6(3), 1-6.

Mis-attunement and Repair

The notion of
“attunement” has a
mythical quality that is not
representative of real
relationships

Healthy development is
founded in **repair** of
mismatch

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 is Where the Action Is

- Provides fuel for growth and change
- Adaptive coping strategies
- Hopeful sense of self
- Agency
- Resilience
- Capacity for trust and intimacy

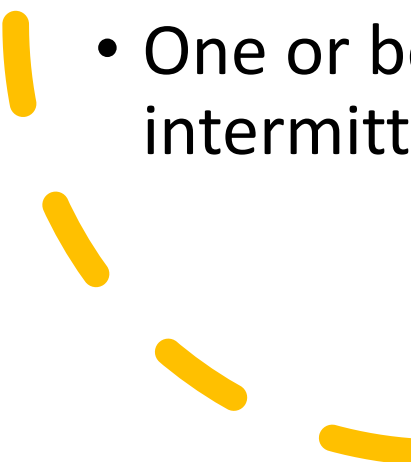
Still-face research with depressed mothers



- The babies of depressed mothers appeared to turn inward, relying on themselves or looking to objects for comfort.
- When mothers were depressed, not only were there more mismatches, but it took much longer for the mismatches to be repaired.
- The longer the time to repair, the higher the level of the stress hormone cortisol in the infant.



Atypical experience of repair: Caregiver role

- Parents preoccupied by their own troubled relationship
 - An anxious mother always intrusively anticipated her baby's every need
 - A parent too overwhelmed and chronically exhausted to repair the inevitable mismatches
 - One or both caregivers under the influence of alcohol or drugs and intermittently emotionally unavailable
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Atypical experiences of repair:

Infant role

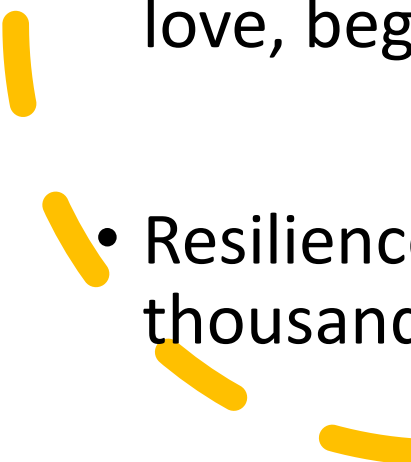
- An infant's signals are difficult to read
- An infant is highly sensitive to a range of sensory input

Mismatch-repair and self-regulation

- Children growing up with insufficient experience of mismatch and repair are at a disadvantage for developing coping mechanisms to regulate their physiological, behavioral, and emotional reactions.
- *Regulatory scaffolding* describes the developmental process by which resilience grows out of interactive repair of the micro-stresses that happen during short-lived, rapidly occurring mismatches.
- The caregiver provides “good-enough” scaffolding to give the child the experience of overcoming a challenge



Resilience Reconsidered

- Resilience is neither a trait you are born with nor one that you acquire in the face of catastrophe.
 - Rather, resilience develops when you muddle through the inevitable countless mismatches that occur in relationships with people you love, beginning in early infancy.
 - Resilience is woven into the fabric of your being in hundreds of thousands of moments over time.
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Going on Being

- D. W. Winnicott used the lovely phrase *going on being* to an experience that develops in the earliest interactions between a caregiver and infant.
- **Not** “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” or “carry on” in the face of adversity.
- A deep internal sense of self that continues to exist even in the face of disruption and loss.

Resilience and Hope

- Accumulated experiences of moving from mismatch to repair lead to a sense of going on being in the face of extreme distress.
- This is the essence of resilience.
- People can experience big, difficult feelings and hold on to the knowledge that at some future time, things will be better

Early Experience is Not Baked in the Cake

- Our brain changes through a process called “neuroplasticity” throughout our lives.
- Just as our sense of ourselves in the world develops over countless early interactions,
- it takes **countless new interactions over time, in a wide range of new and different relationships**, to move from emotional suffering to emotional health.



Organizing Frame in all Clinical Situations

FACILITATE MOMENTS OF MEETING



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
- Individuals who create something new together connect to each other.

Moments of Meeting

- “A match between how one knows oneself and how one is known”

Beatrice Beebe



Moment of meeting

- Music teacher for high needs, low resourced kids
- “I didn’t know what I was doing”
- “You changed my life”



Moment of meeting





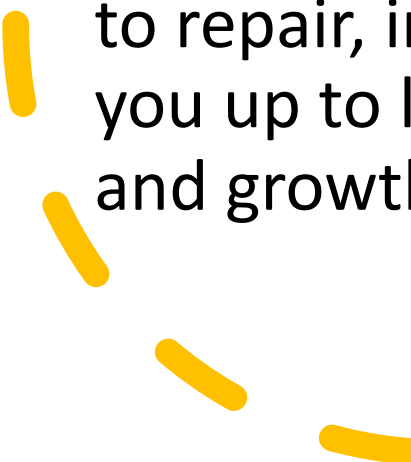
Tania and Calvin

- From certainty to not-knowing
- Mismatch and repair
- Moment of meeting



Finding Hope in Uncertainty

“When you feel hopeless, lacking in experience of repair, clinging to certainty gets in the way of listening and leads to a downward spiral of rigidity and hopelessness.



In contrast, when you experience the joy of moving through mismatch to repair, in a kind of positive feedback loop, your sense of hope opens you up to listen to others with curiosity, leading to further connection and growth.”

Core Task: Create Moments of meeting

Countless moments over time are needed to shift meanings from hopelessness to hope

Facilitate moments when clients make meaning of themselves in relationship with others that is characterized by a sense of hope and belonging

Thank You

