Attachment theory

Attachment theory developed out of the work of John Bowlby and is concerned with the way human beings relate to each other and either feel safe or insecure in certain situations (such as when being on their own, being left, being in new situations).

There are five basic principles or assumptions of attachment theory:

1. Infants are programmed to seek *proximity to an attachment figure*, usually a parent, who supplies comfort and protection from danger at times of distress, illness and fatigue.

2. In the absence of threat, this attachment figure offers a *secure base* from which the infant can begin to explore his or her environment, both physically and emotionally.

3. When parted from the attachment figure the infant responds with *separation protest* – expressions of distress and aggression.

4. The reciprocal relationship of the individual and his or her attachment figure is stored psychologically in the form of an *internal working model* which guides future assumptions about the responsiveness, reliability, proximity and intimacy of those he or she feels close to.

5. The *attachment dynamic* does not end in infancy but continues through life in latent form, and is particularly activated in adults in times of distress.

From: Holmes, J. (1994) Attachment theory – a secure theoretical base for counseling? *Psychodynamic Counselling, 1*, 65-78.

Psychology in the Real World groups have sometimes explored attachment theory as one way in which we might understand our own and other people's behaviour, especially our anxieties in new situations (eg when groups start or come to an end). In group exercises when asked what makes us feel safe and what makes us feel insecure participants have referred to the following:

What makes us feel insecure?
[Psychology in the Real World group participants' responses]

Being on my own and feeling alone
Not having someone to rely on
Unemployment and threat of unemployment
Losses eg marriage breakdown
Not feeling in control e.g. of my life; of my environment
Fear of any situation you can't control
Isolation and loneliness
Parents not 'being there'
Bullying
Scorn
Anti-social environments/neighbours
My personal space being invaded
Arguments
Bad health/illness
Lack of confidence
Not having enough knowledge/Not having answers
Lack of response from another person
Silence
Change
New situations (like joining this group!)
Being at a crossroads
Changes in the pattern of my life
Making commitments
Class issues and where I fit
'Breaks in the chain that protects'
'Damaged road' that I'm going down again

What helps us feel safe and secure?
[Psychology in the Real World Group participants' responses]

Friends
Being with people I trust and who trust me
Being in this group
Being cuddled
Being protected by a strong man
Feeling wanted
A sense of belonging
Comfort
My dog
Being in the countryside
Protection from the bad things in life
My house/home. No-one can come in unless invited
Bricks and mortar; a roof over my head

Being at home, sometimes with the door locked; it gives me time to think
A detached house
Financial security – money in the bank
Possessions
Things that guard us and comfort us
Knowing my family are safe and secure
Being somewhere where I've been before and felt happy or safe in
Personal boundaries, when people respect them
Feeling good about myself
Knowing what I want
Taking responsibility for myself
Being happy with whom I am
Police and the Justice system
Democracy
Turning the t.v. /news off
Insurance
A reliable car
A full larder
 'A safe'
Tissues under my pillow
Heat; warmth
Hot chocolate
Curling up and feeling safe, warm and cosy in a favourite place