



The Institute of Family Living

Creative Dependence: The Key to a Healthy Personal and Community Life

Dependence has become a dirty word. To many it implies enfeeblement and exaggerated reliance on other people or, in phrases like “drug dependence,” on specific substances.

Two well-known Canadian child development experts observe that many parents express concern that their child be dependent at all. “We want our children to be self-directing, self-motivated, self-controlled, self-confident, self-orienting, self-reliant, self-sufficient and self-assured.” (Maté and Neufeld, 2004, p. 63)

I have similarly noticed that parents may come into therapy complaining about their child’s oppositional or other problem behaviours, but rarely do they complain that their child has stopped looking to them for nurturing and assistance.

Likewise, many adults who come to therapy in a time of emotional depletion or relationship crisis often struggle with feelings of shame that they “had to come to therapy.” It may take months of developing a secure working relationship with their therapists for clients to see that seeking therapy is a healthy expression of their courage to acknowledge limitations and find appropriate support.

Attachment

John Bowlby (1969), the renowned developer of attachment theory, described the nature of the behaviour by which children and adults seek periodic access to a source of renewal.

Bowlby studied common interactions between children and their mothers. For example, a parent may be chatting on a bench at a playground while their children roam around. For a while a child will explore boldly and freely, ignoring their parent(s). Then, after a while, they will use up their store of courage and confidence and run back to their parents’ side and cling there for a while, as if to recharge their batteries. After a moment or two of this they are ready for more exploring, and so they venture out again.

These “attachment behaviours,” as Bowlby called them, in young children — of clinging, following (physically or with the eyes), crying, calling, and smiling — are complimented by various responses to the child on the part of the parent. She or he checks that the child is safe, responds to his crying and smiling, and retrieves him if he wanders too far away.

Bowlby was quick to highlight that attachment behaviour does not disappear as the child grows older, but allows for more extended absences. In adult life, periods of attachment normally alternate with periods of autonomous activity. Bowlby observed that we all need healthy expressions and experiences of dependence. Through the accessing of sufficient support and sustenance, we gain the ability to tackle the tough demands of autonomous functioning.

Attachment Figures

Intimate relationships with friends and family and loved ones (e.g., honest conversations in an atmosphere of unconditional love) are a staple of healthy dependence on attachment figures. Many of us can attest to the comforting and replenishing experience of receiving a hug and maybe a bowl of chicken soup offered by a loved one at times of illness or vulnerability. In a specialized contractual form of intimate relationship, psychotherapists can provide crucial safety, support, and empathy to individuals, families, and groups, during times of conflict, emotional pain, and depletion.

Bowlby and many other astute observers of societal development, have noted that not just individuals, but groups and institutions can function as important attachment figures.

Many years ago, I wrote my family psychology doctoral dissertation on the role that churches and faith communities can play in providing attachment needs and support to individuals and societies. The focus of the dissertation was on the interactive relationship between healthy dependency and healthy independence and how this can be supported in faith community life. I argued that (1) faith communities have unique things to offer to people in terms of emotional and spiritual sustenance during inevitable times of depletion and brokenness; and (2) once people have received sufficient renewal, faith communities are uniquely suited to support and challenge people to serve others in need. Indeed, I contended that a crucial measure of the health of a given faith community is the degree to which the leaders, rituals, and symbols facilitate an ongoing oscillation between healthy dependence and independence, as marked by service to others in the broader community.

Dependency is not a dirty word. Rather, it is a beautiful word — that invites all of us to acknowledge our limitations, experience the joy that comes from giving and receiving support, and in sustaining us so that we can reach out in service to others.

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For Further Reading:

Bowlby, John. Attachment and Loss, Vol. 1. London: Hogarth Press, 1969.

Maté, Gabor and Neufeld, Gordon. Hold on to your kids: Why Parents Matter. Canada: Alfred Knopf, 2004.



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