

INSIGHTS

The science of connection



Finding skilful ways to manage strong emotion that get triggered in everyday life can be one of the most challenging aspects of raising a family.

Kate arrived home late from work exhausted to the sound of her teenage sons arguing. Life for her family hadn't returned to normal after the pandemic. Emotions ran wild and Kate and her partner often felt as if they were walking on eggshells around the boys.

Usually, she was able to hold on to an awareness that she needed to monitor how she reacted to their arguments. On this occasion, however, in the moment that anger overwhelmed her, Kate felt absolutely convinced that the boys were not even trying. In that moment memories of similar difficult times flooded into her mind and added to her sense of outrage. Before she was aware of what she was doing, Kate had stormed into their room, angrily yelling that she was fed up with both of them and was fed-up with being their mother.

There was no answering back from the boys this time. Kate felt shocked by the words that had tumbled out of her mouth. She apologised and left the room in tears.

Later that day, Kate was able to see that the incident with the boys had triggered within her an even more complex issue. One year ago, a disagreement with her sister had escalated into a heated argument and their relationship had not recovered. The precious friendship they had shared seemed lost, transformed into a painfully difficult situation where family gatherings were tense, and Kate felt caught up in messy feelings of anger and sadness.

We're all familiar with situations like this, painful disconnections which can undermine the strength of relationships in an ongoing way. Can you recall a similar experience? Try and picture it in your mind and see if you can recall what it's like to be pulled into a compelling story line and be engulfed in strong feelings like anger, shame, or fear.

Ironically, managed well, situations like this can be powerful opportunities for growth. The secret lies not in getting better at arguing your perspective, but by understanding how our nervous system processes memory and emotion.

Deep beneath conscious awareness, in a primitive part of the brain called the limbic system, 3 discrete systems of emotion – threat, strive, and connect – are in constant flux. Each system is driven by nerve cell pathways which run throughout the body as well as specific hormones and neurotransmitters. Our most important memories tend to be encoded within only one of these systems.

When Kate heard the raised voices of conflict, her threat system fired up and her system was flooded with the stress hormone cortisol. The threat system powerfully disconnects us from parts of the brain that help provide clear thinking, creativity, and wisdom.

The parenting program Circle of Security calls this [shark music](#).

But just like any muscle, each system of emotion can be strengthened. The threat system is by far the most powerful. The system that tends to come in as its antidote, is the strive system.

parenting * ideas

Running on the “feel good” hormone dopamine, the strive system encourages us to distract and disconnect from negative feelings. Although comfortable in the short term, if our response is only to turn away from what’s difficult, then we don’t learn how to repair ruptures in our relationships by using the skills available to us in the more fragile connect system. This explains why over time, patterns of shutting down and disconnecting tend only to get stronger.

The connection system uses the hormone oxytocin, which has been called the love hormone. When this system is active, the stress response is calmed and we are able to move closer toward what is hard and become curious about a bigger picture. We are better able to pick up on the feelings and perspective of others and not be so triggered by what they are doing or saying.

Patterns of disconnection in relationships usually begin in childhood and form the basis of what are called insecure patterns of attachment. This explains why for many people, handling anger skilfully can be very tricky. But research shows clearly that because the nervous system is capable of change, these underlying patterns can be transformed and lead to what is called an earned secure attachment.

Research has revealed many ways in which we can build strength in the system of connection.

In closing

As we worked together, Kate learned how to use methods of mindfulness, imagery and body-based practices to shift out of a threat response. By deliberately bringing to mind memories of arguments and disconnections, she learned how to ride waves of anger. She practiced looking more closely at the storylines she was holding onto and as time went on, she found ways to use interactions with others as opportunities to tune in more carefully to what was often going on at a deeper level.



[Click here to view a quick tip video by Dr Justin Coulson related to this Insights article](#)



Dr Diana Korevaar

Dr Diana Korevaar is a perinatal psychiatrist, whose priority has been to help parents raise resilient and happy children. In her book *Mindfulness for Mums and Dads*, she adapted the science of neuroplasticity and mindfulness into practical skills which translate the challenging experiences of parenting and relationships into opportunities for growth.