



RELATIONSHIPS AND HUMANITARIAN WORK

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What Relationships?

When asking humanitarians about the health of their relationships I often get a laugh and the response, "What relationships?" I get it. This work is tough on relationships.

Yet a broad and deep social support network is an essential pillar of your ability to survive and thrive in your humanitarian work. Good relationships are a source of meaning and purpose for most people. It was the one dimension that predicted well-being in every one of 132 countries studied. Social support enhances your physical health, emotional positivity, life satisfaction and even your life expectancy. You could conclude if you want to have a good life, work on your relationships!

The list of relationship challenges in humanitarian work for both ex-pats and national staff is long:

- Lengthy and frequent separations from loved ones
- Frequent change and disruptions
- International deployments, especially to non family postings
- 24/7 workload and unremitting stress
- Worry about a partner or family member & inability to help them
- Exhaustion, energy depletion
- Experiences that are hard to share, even harder to understand
- Patchy communication due to time zone differences & technical lapses
- Intensity of field relationships that may compete with commitments at home
- Isolation that leads to tunnel vision
- Intense field work in contrast to more mundane life at home
- Putting your family at risk because of your work

Yet, despite this, many humanitarians have intimate partner relationships that thrive. How do they find each other and how do they make it work? In this posting and those to follow, I will be focusing on intimate relationships. Intimacy refers to a close personal relationship, including marriage, housemates, parenting, extended family, and friendships.



Because humanitarian work places such unusual demands on relationships, a high degree of relationship skill and focused attention are necessary in both partners to make the relationship flourish.

Our work at Headington Institute has pointed to **attachment style** as key to resiliency. It refers to our typical pattern of relating to our partners in intimate relationships. People differ in the ways in which they approach close relationships. For example, some people are comfortable opening up to others emotionally, but others are reluctant to depend on others. These become patterns in our relationships over time.

Our attachment style is not something we choose. It is a bit like being an introvert or an extravert. Our attachment style is formed in the rich interplay of our biology and our early experience in our family with our parents and siblings. It is quite difficult to change our attachment style, but we can work toward improving our ability to connect in relationships in a healthier and more productive way.

Competencies are the attitudes, knowledge and skills that we have acquired through learning. They can be learned either formally as in education and training, or informally in our families and communities. Relationship competencies include communication, conflict resolution, and intimacy. Intimacy is the ability to give and receive support and affection, tune in to others' needs and feelings, and share important aspects of yourself with others. People can grow their competencies with practice and discipline. Improving our competencies is something that we can all do something about.

What is your attachment style?

I have been writing about the difficulty and the importance of making intimate relationships work in the humanitarian context. One of the influences on relationships is your attachment style. This is your usual pattern of relating to others. Your attachment style is formed very early in life. It is a result of your biology and your early relationships. While you have little choice over the attachment style that you have developed, you can work on skills to improve your relationships regardless of your attachment style. Understanding, accepting, and making the most of your attachment style is possible for everyone by developing our relationship competencies. (See the next blog!)

There are two fundamental ways in which people differ from one another in relationships. First is the dimension of insecurity/security. People with attachment anxiety worry about whether their partners really love them and fear rejection. People who are secure are much less worried about such matters. They feel confident about their partner's love for them. Second, is the dimension of avoidance/connection. People who avoid attachment are less comfortable depending on others and opening up to others. People who comfortable with connection have an easier time being vulnerable and emotionally connected to others.

Here are a few fictional examples of how these relational styles might play out in relationships:

Secure attachment. Ada is a relief worker who describes herself in the following way: "It is relatively easy for me to become emotionally close to others. I am comfortable depending on others and having others depend on me. I don't worry about being alone or having others not accept me."

Ada has a secure attachment style and so does her husband, Raul. This style of attachment usually results from a history of warm and responsive interactions in early childhood and with later relationship partners. Ada has positive views of herself and Raul. They are both very satisfied with their marriage.

Ada is comfortable both with closeness and with independence. She loves the time she spends on deployment, but also loves to come back home. She feels close to her husband regardless of where she is and looks forward



to her calls with him at the end of the day. They can stay committed and affectionately involved even with the frequent, lengthy, separations; distance; and patchy communication that come with humanitarian work. Because Ada is comfortable and confident around people, she has a good support network. Raul is not jealous, but relaxed about Ada's friendships with her work colleagues and friends.

Ada and Raul are both characterized by security and connection. This style makes it easier to engage in humanitarian work. Secure partners are able to give and receive affection, stay positive, and handle separations well. When people feel confident about themselves and their partners they are free to use their energy to focus on their complex jobs. When they are home, they are able to enjoy their relationship fully.

Of course, most of us are not fortunate enough to be fully secure and comfortable with connection. Because of our "wiring" and early experience we may fall somewhere closer to the insecure or avoidant end of the continuum. Security and connection are something we have to work toward by further developing our communication and intimacy skills. The other three attachment styles are the result of some degree of insecurity or avoidance or a combination of both.

Insecure attachment. Bo is engaged to a woman who has had a successful career as an international development worker. At first he was proud of her achievements. But he is increasingly uncomfortable with her work, especially with her frequent travel. This is how Bo describes himself. "I want to be completely emotionally intimate with others, but I often find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I am uncomfortable being without close relationships, but I sometimes worry that others don't value me as much as I value them."

Bo has an insecure attachment style. Bo seeks and is comfortable with high levels of intimacy, approval, and responsiveness from his partner. He values their closeness so much that he can become too dependent on her at times. Bo has less positive views about himself. He can fall into doubt about his worth as a partner and may sometimes blame himself for his partner's lack of responsiveness. He often expresses his worry and jealousy to his fiancée. He finds her friendships with her colleagues threatening.

Bo is skilled and comfortable with intimacy but he has difficulty with separation. His anxiety is increased even with the thought of upcoming separation. He often 'spoils' the last few days his fiancée has at home before a trip. When she returns he is often upset, angry, or clinging for some period of time before they can get back into their normal close routine. An anxious attachment style may pose difficulty for humanitarian partners like Bo who must endure frequent separations.

Bo's strength is in his ability to connect. But he does not readily feel secure. His relationship with his fiancée can benefit from both of them working on the dimension of security. Increasing positive communication, expressing affection, and scheduling regular times for pleasant activities together can be helpful. Bo's awareness that his insecurity comes from his past history, rather than his current partner may help him regulate his negative emotions. They can consider connectedness a strength that Bo brings to their relationship.

Dismissive attachment. Sue is an aid worker who has been stationed in Cypress for five years. She describes herself in this way: "I am comfortable without close emotional relationships. It is very important to me to feel independent and self-sufficient, and I prefer not to depend on others or have others depend on me."

Sue desires a high level of independence. In fact, she avoids attachment altogether. She doesn't feel she needs close relationships. They are unimportant to her. In the past, Sue has had partners but has not been particularly close to them. Though her self-esteem is positive, she did not view her partners very positively. Sue hides her feelings and often distances herself from others including her work colleagues. She enjoys her alone time. She infrequently contacts her family and friends from home.



Humanitarian work can be very comfortable for people like Sue with a dismissive attachment style. If they are in a relationship, they usually look forward to the times of separation and independence. Unless their partner is similar in style, however, their “out of sight, out of mind” attitude may make it difficult for the relationship to survive. Humanitarians with this style may also find it difficult to benefit from social support in times of stress and crisis. They may prefer to “go it alone.”

Sue’s strength is her sense of security but she needs to work on connectedness. Though she may be comfortable with her style, her support network and work relationships may benefit from working on her skills of connection. Her family and friends may feel like she doesn’t care about them because of her style. In particular, she may benefit from increasing her skills at knowing and being known. Practicing self-disclosure and becoming more curious about others is a good way to start. Working to address problems directly rather than ignore or avoid them may also improve her relationships.

Fearful attachment. David is a disaster relief specialist who has a home base in Australia but often is deployed overseas. He agrees with the following self-description: “I am somewhat uncomfortable getting close to others. I want emotionally close relationships, but I find it difficult to trust others completely, or to depend on them. I sometimes worry that I will be hurt if I allow myself to become too close to others.”

David has mixed feelings about close relationships. On the one hand, he wants to have a wife and children. On the other hand, he is uncomfortable with commitment and emotional closeness. David has often come close to getting engaged but at the last minute gets cold feet, worrying that he is not ready or the woman is not the right one for him. David’s girlfriend complains that he is not affectionate enough and often she feels neglected.

David is unhappy by the absence of an intimate partner, yet afraid to commit to a relationship. He often finds it a relief to go on deployment. While he is away he tends to get caught up in his work and doesn’t communicate as much as he needs to keep his relationships whole and healthy. When he returns his girlfriend is often frustrated by his distance and lack of emotional connection.

David needs to work on increasing both security and connection. He could benefit from working on his positive communication and affection, especially self-disclosure. Being intentional about increasing the time he spends working on his relationships will be crucial. David also needs to explore the roots of his difficulty trusting others to care for him.

Do you recognize yourself or your partner in any of these scenarios? If so, perhaps it can help you to understand your relationship history. While it is difficult to change your attachment style or the style of your partner, it is very important to understand how your styles affect each other. You can compensate for attachment problems by increasing your relationship competencies such as communication, conflict resolution and emotional expressiveness.

What can you do to improve your relationships?

Positive relationships are core to our well-being and ability to bounce back after a crisis. They help us to cope with stress, provide us with meaning, and are a source of enjoyment and pleasure. In fact, people who fail to list positive relationships as a source of meaning in their life are more likely to be depressed and anxious.

Solid social support networks are vital to building resiliency. They help to offset the unusually high levels of chronic stress, vicarious and acute trauma experienced by humanitarian workers. Yet the nature of



humanitarian work often makes it difficult to sustain relationships over time. The many challenges require that humanitarians and their partners devote time and attention to developing their relationship skills.

Positive relationships are characterized by security and connectedness. Partners know each other well. They are confident that their partner will use their intimate knowledge for good, not to compete or gain advantage. They enjoy their time together, but they are also comfortable with independence. Their security allows them to explore the world and engage creatively in their work, knowing their partner supports them. Relationship competencies increase the security and connectedness in relationships.

Competencies are the attitudes, knowledge and skills that we have acquired through learning. Relationship competencies include communication and intimacy. People can grow their competencies with practice and discipline. Improving our competencies is something that we can all do something about.

Communication is a process that includes both expressing and listening. Most people can improve their skills in both areas! Expressiveness includes verbal and non-verbal communication. Facial expressions, eye contact, posture, gestures, touch are as important as the words we use. Listening involves tuning in to all of these dimensions.

Two aspects of communication are particularly important to intimate relationships: positivity and conflict resolution.

- **Positive communication.** Because people are more sensitive to negative communication than they are to positive, it is vital that both partners get in the habit of communicating affection, acceptance and respect freely. It has been shown that successful relationships, whether at home or work have positive interactions that outnumber their negative interactions by a ratio of greater than 3:1. In other words, we need to be sure that we balance every negative communication with more than three positives. One of the signs that a relationship is in real trouble is the presence of frequent criticism, nagging, and contempt.
- **Conflict resolution.** Good conflict resolution involves paying attention to the relationship as well as to solving the problem. People vary in the degree to which they focus on one dimension or the other. Successful resolution pays attention to both and looks for a cooperative or win/win outcome. In positive conflict resolution both partners will:
 - Clearly articulate their own position
 - Listen carefully to the position of the other
 - Invite other views & welcome differences
 - Participate non-defensively in evaluating strengths & weaknesses of all positions
 - Seek additional information & look for alternative creative solutions
 - At times agree to “split the difference”
 - Inhibit destructive tendencies to nag, complain, lash out or be hurt in order to engage in healthy problem solving and conflict resolution.
 - Practice forgiveness



Intimacy is the ability to give and receive support and affection, tune in to others' needs and feelings, and share important aspects of yourself with others. Self-awareness and curiosity about the other contribute to good intimacy.

- Both partners are invested in knowing one another deeply. Each discloses true thoughts, feelings, wishes, and fears. They don't let go of this process even after knowing each other for years, recognizing that people grow and change. This knowledge is used positively rather than as a 'weapon' for criticism.
- When there are problems and challenges, they rely on their partner for care and emotional support. They don't avoid telling each other about difficulties. On the contrary, they go to each other in those tough times. In these challenging times they provide comfort to each other. They respond positively to the need for support and closeness. They assist as they are able by listening, providing information, or solving problems.
- They are confident that they play a unique role in the life of the other. No one else can replace them.

What can help?

It is very difficult to work on these relationship competencies if you are pressured for quality time together. Take your leave time and plan fun times together. When you are home, process what you need to with your partner, but let go of doing your work. Don't check your email constantly! Be fully present for your loved ones. When you are at work, be sure to stay connected to home in whatever ways you can. While relationships can be hard work, a loving and secure connection is a true source of joy and meaning.