

Healing from chronic emotional mis-attunement

How to stop covering your ache of emotional aloneness
with self-sufficiency and achievement
by Kelly Werner Ph.D.

*"It's no measure of health to be well adjusted to a
family or culture that requires you to abandon
your emotional needs to belong."*

Many people walked on eggshells around a parent growing up, and are puzzled as to why they are struggling in adulthood. When caregivers are consumed with their own anxiety or triggered reactions, they can fail to meet their child's needs of attention and care. This little 't' trauma is a trauma of omission. It is about what the child does not receive, so they don't know what they are missing. "How are you feeling?" "It's OK that you are sad," "Sorry I just hurt you," were hardly uttered in these homes. When this failing happens repeatedly over years, the child eventually goes numb to their longing to feel felt and be known. One learns: "No one is going to help me when I feel like a failure, excluded or down. I have to turn my feelings off on my own." Abandoning our inner emotional life in service of what others are comfortable with or what professional cultures reward. Many cope with relentless self-sufficiency, making sure to hide when they feel gut-punched or overwhelmed. It's just not safe to be vulnerable when struggling. The go-to strategies of achievement and perfectionism at the cost of self-abandonment become the norm.

On the outside, many of these families look enviable, with cars in both garages and two parents at home paying for private school. So when comments like: "What, that bothers you?" "You don't really feel that" "Stop being so sensitive," are common-place, the child resorts to thinking: "What's wrong with me? Why is this so hard?" Denying they feel overwhelmed and hung out to dry when dismissed by their Mom. Resisting their healthy yearning to co-regulate and be soothed. These early wounds of emotional abuse can then be re-triggered in adulthood in marriages with partners who are less attuned, or by being single for much longer than one wants to be, or toxic team cultures at work too.

Charmaine's family looked like a model family on the outside. Her parents went to Stanford. She excelled in academics and sports. Today as a physician and married Mom of three, her life is envied by others. Yet Charmaine never remembers being hugged or told "I love you," growing up. She does remember so many days after school, running up to her room, crying about feeling ostracized, and composing herself before she went down to the living room. "It's selfish to be sad," "You are too much," were messages that reverberated in her heart. Thousands of times you'd find her full splayed across their dog, holding on tight to cope with her 'big feelings', as he was the one being in the home she could co-regulate with. When she did get really excited about things and was bouncing around the house with exuberance, her Mom would harshly judge: "What's wrong with you?" Her Dad would take advantage of her warmth and empathy, and hold her hand on the couch as he unloaded all his emotional woes. In retrospect, she shudders at how creepy it all felt. But it was all she knew. "Get your shit together. Don't bother me with your needs. I'm not going to protect you from your Dad. You need

to represent this family and look good to my friends,” were the implicit family rules she lived by. As an adult Charmaine runs a whole ward at the hospital, training residents, and mothers her kids so well. But she’s over-performing from a place of self-abandonment. Shame is a major tool that is used within her to be presentable all day long to others and make so much happen in a day. Deep down there is a well of grief, despair, shame and overwhelm that she is constantly staying too busy to feel often by giving to others. Recently she overheard her 70’s mother saying to a family friend: “What? Charmaine doesn’t need help with her marriage. She doesn’t have needs.”

Attunement is to show some interest in another’s interior world. Seeking to understand how something impacted them. What the experience means to them underneath. Attunement is to put yourself in another’s shoes and feel some of what they are feeling. You either imagine how it must feel for them, or you connect with the place in yourself that has felt something similar. We can attune to both the lows and highs of another’s life. What pierces their heart and emotionally hurts. Seeing and honoring where they get energy from and what lights them up. Even when it’s not what does it for you. And in order to be able to linger in another’s experience and attune for a bit, one needs to be in touch with their own emotional landscape.

Chronic mis-attunement happens in a wide variety of scenarios. Some of us were bullied by an older sibling, or a parent was chronically depressed and unavailable, or our ideas were perpetually invalidated or gaslit at our church. At the micro level, 1000s and 1000s interactive episodes of mis-attunement can gradually accumulate and flood one’s body with stress hormones. Our limbic system stays engaged and we are in survival mode most of the time. If the system gets overwhelmed, one then shuts down. There is a video from a research study showing an infant smiling repeatedly at his depressed Mom. After many attempts with no response, the infant goes stone-face and limp. This may even be more deleterious to empathetic type people.

It gets very confusing for the recipient of emotional mis-attunement when the parents were well-meaning and were attuned in some moments like with a broken arm and taking one to the hospital. But then laughs at the child for being so sensitive about a kid not playing with them. Then the child thinks it is their fault for feeling bad. This leads to low self-worth. Like in Charmaine’s case it seems like her parents saw her potential and supported her to stick with hard things like homework or sports until she succeeded. And attended many of her events. But then when she was not invited to the prom her Mom says: “No one can know. No daughter of mine is going to be rejected. How did you let this happen?” Adding insult to injury Charmaine felt overwhelmed by the boys and her mother’s rejection. Yet her Mom was focused on her social reputation rather than Charmaine’s emotional experience. Attunement would be to connect with the daughter’s internal world and offer some care. “Oh I see you are hurting. Rejection is the worst. Want a hug? I’d like to be here with you while it’s hard.”

There is no singular psychological term for the experience of chronic emotional mis-attunement. Related terms are emotional neglect, attachment trauma, relational trauma,

little 't' trauma, emotional abuse, invisible trauma, complex trauma, parentified children, adult children of emotionally immature parents or an adult child of an alcoholic. Steven, an executive at Google, says that his body gets anxious when he starts to relax. He remembers when growing up his Mom had a sense of when he was getting too comfortable in the house. Once he sat down to do homework or something, she'd come in and make him move or do some chores. He could never just sit and 'be.' It was a struggle to get any reading done in that house. She was not comfortable in her own skin, so then wouldn't allow him to be in his. Between the summers in high-school he remembers having a day job and a night job. Why? He thinks to himself now. His high-school was free. Mis-attunement to a child's need to connect with themselves. To this day at age 50, his anxiety is still high. It's hard for him to relax and allow himself to just be.

So what are the consequences of this trauma of omission? Why is this so bad? A lot of this stuff is pretty normal in many households. What's the big deal? Trauma can be defined as having an experience where you feel emotionally overwhelmed yet alone in the feelings. Like you can't really express to someone what you are going through. And it's to feel helpless about your ability to take action and get the other to meet your need.

Two hallmark features of this little 't' trauma of chronic mis-attunement are emotional aloneness and self-doubt. When one is hurting and thinks it is their fault for feeling this way, it is isolating and lonely. They are not doing the healthy co-regulation they need to release the energy. And then they doubt their own experience. They didn't receive any 'real' abuse: "Others have it so much worse. I shouldn't complain." So a self-gaslighting happens where they downplay or question their experience and the discomfort of a Dad holding a teenage daughter's hand on the couch inappropriately, goes underground.

Chronic mis-attunement can lead to experiences such as depression, substance abuse, personality issues, workaholism, body image obsession, complex PTSD, borderline personality disorder, suicidal ideation, numbing with food, dissociative disorders, and psychosomatic issues like GI distress, headaches, chronic pain, to name a few. Specifically, four main areas that are underdeveloped when one has not received appropriate emotional attunement are:

Self-awareness & Self-regulation: Sufferers are less able to identify their feelings and self-soothe. They often overuse emotional suppression to push their emotions down and power through.

Self-worth: Sufferers report feeling invisible and unseen. Their younger self implicitly assumed that what they were truly thinking and feelings was not worth knowing. That their underlying emotional experience don't matter.

Relationships: Relationships can be triggering, as the sufferer is dying for connection and intimacy. Yet their skills at knowing their emotional needs, valuing them, assuming that others can meet them, and effectively asking for what they need never got developed.

Self-connection & Vitality: People can feel less connected to their love, motivation, and aliveness. The juice of what makes them feel human.

Often the ones mis-attuning to us, had it harder, never learning emotional nurturing skills themselves, and thus the cycle of emotional abuse marches forward. Blame becomes a meaningless concept when you see how generational trauma was perpetuated through the years.

When we attune with others, we allow our own internal state to shift, to come to resonate with the inner world of another. This resonance is at the heart of the important sense of “feeling felt” that emerges in close relationships. We need attunement to feel secure and to develop well in childhood. Throughout our lives we need attunement to feel close and connected.

The great news is that we can heal from chronic emotional mis-attunement. Co-regulating in the midst of emotional overwhelm, and learning to listen to one’s inner wisdom that inherently knows how to heal itself can go a long way for the mis-attuned. The process of ATTUNE can help one recover:

- A Acknowledge that you were emotionally mis-attuned to (psychoeducation)
- T Tune into your higher self (connect to your non-egoic core self/awareness)
- T Tend to your emotional needs (self-soothing/emotion regulation strategies)
- U Undo emotional aloneness (co-regulation & corrective attunement with another)
- N Narrate your life from an updated perspective (shift from a story of self-blame to one of emotional needs poorly met by unskilled others; own your unique value)
- E Empower yourself to take up emotional and relational space (foster constructive dependency; learn to detect your needs in real time, speak in a way that you expect your emotional and relationship needs to be met, say what you think; express love)

If you’ve read this far maybe you’ve felt the pain of your inner world not being attended to enough by others. When this happens we then also learned to self-doubt and self-gaslight ourselves. In this case, please know that emotional pain you’ve been in makes sense. I could be helpful to narrate your life from an updated perspective:

“I was emotionally neglected. My close others (e.g. caregivers, partner, boss or lack there-of etc...) did not have the skill to emotionally attune to me. Most weren’t trying to actively ignore me, they were caught in their own stress reaction, trauma, lack of ability to be with their own emotions, so they couldn’t be with mine. I was loved by them in the way they could. It makes sense that I’ve felt so much emotional pain or numbness in life. It makes sense that I’ve been stuck, depressed, had interpersonal issues, or turned to food/substances. There is an

explanation. It is not that I am fundamentally un-loveable, bad, less than, unworthy or lazy. I am wise, attuned and capable. As I go forward I can find supports to help me choose to not self-abandon, connect with attuned people, feel reciprocal love and my own self-expression, and I can heal and thrive.”