Our Need For Attunement

Neuroscientist Curt Thompson is fond of saying that when each one of us comes into this world, we enter it looking for someone looking for us… and it never stops. On the day we were born our deepest need was for another to be attuned to us… and it remains our deepest need today.

What Attunement Is

Attunement begins by intentionally looking for the heart of another. It begins with a desire to pursue another with the sole intention of knowing another's inner emotional world—that inner sea inside all of us. Attunement is about focusing our attention on the internal world of another.

The window into another's emotional world is their nonverbal communication—that is, their facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language. To attune to another, therefore, we must pay more attention to how someone is saying something than to what they are saying. Words can cover up the truth (in fact, they are often designed to do just that!), but facial expression, tone of voice, and body language always tell the truth.

There are two keys to attuning to another's inner experience—paying attention to their body (i.e., their nonverbal communication) and paying attention to your body. You cannot attune to another without being attuned to your own body—what you are feeling as the other person speaks. As someone shares their story, do you find yourself feeling frantic inside? Is it difficult to breathe? Do you feel shame? Sorrow? These feelings give you clues about what the other is experiencing inside themselves. One task of a spouse, or a close friend, is to be emotionally present enough to attune to the other person’s inner emotional experience.

When you are on the receiving end of attunement, the result is that you “feel felt.” You have the sense that the other person really “gets” what is happening inside of you. You know that they know what you are feeling. As a result, you feel joined. Brene Brown has pointed out that when something is wrong inside, a response from another person rarely makes it better—what makes it better is connection. When someone is attuned to you, the result is a feeling of connection with them.

Why Attunement Matters

Put simply, when another person is attuned to your emotions, you feel loved. When you truly “feel felt” by another—when you know that they know what is happening inside of you—then you feel safe enough to become more emotionally present and vulnerable. Nothing feels safer than when we are in the presence of another who is attuned to the dark, shameful places inside of us and yet has a posture toward us of kindness rather than contempt. Conversely, it can be extremely lonely to be feeling something deeply—and longing for attunement—only to realize that the other person has no idea what is happening inside of you.

A second reason that attunement matters is because we can’t know ourselves until another knows us. Herein lies the possibility of any deep relationship—it can be a wild adventure of coming to know yourself… because another truly knows you. When someone is attuned
to us, they can help us name those automatic emotional reactions that we can't name because they are all we've ever known.

Over the past two decades, neuroscientists have discovered that there is really no such thing as an “individual.” We are constantly influencing one another’s emotional and physical states. Created in the image of a triune God—a “we” not an “I”—we are intrinsically dependent upon others. When we engage deep and painful emotions, we need others so that we can maintain (or regain) a sense of stability and groundedness. Attunement is the way in which you help someone stay close to difficult emotions while remaining grounded in the present. It is the way you help regulate another's emotions when he or she is in a highly aroused state.

Now, let’s confess the obvious: close relationships (spousal or otherwise) are often “adventures in misattunement”! The good news is that we do not need others to get it right all the time. What we need is for someone to want to attune to us, to get it right about half the time, and to re-attune when they get it wrong. As a child, you didn’t really need your mother to “get you” all the time—you needed her to realize when she had missed you (misattunement) and then seek to find you again (re-attune). Nothing feels safer.

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