

## The power of emotional memories

Our emotional memories of what it *feels* like to be safe, cared for and soothed are developed in our early *attachment relationships* with our parents and others. We can draw on these emotional memories in adulthood when we need to feel safe and cared for, as they can be used to help tone down the threat system and bring our emotions into balance. In other words, when we need to soothe ourselves as adults and make ourselves

feel better when we are distressed, we are unconsciously linking back and recalling how we were soothed by our mothers (or other main care givers) during childhood.

Experiences in childhood that include receipt of emotional and physical affection, kindness, warmth, protection and understanding can all enhance our ability to develop compassion for ourselves and others.

Caring experiences (talking to and showing interest in children, sharing positive feelings, validating and exploring what children are feeling) are signals to the child's brain that they are loved and valued. This means the *soothing* system is regulating the *threat* system. By providing a soothing and an understanding response to a baby or child's distress, the parent is helping the child to learn that their own, sometimes fierce emotions can be regulated and brought to an end, as outlined in the following scenario:

### *Jessie, Jonnie and Billy*

Jessie, Jonnie and Billy, all five years old, were playing together in the playground when suddenly they were caught in a thunder and lightning storm. The boys were very frightened as it was scary and they started crying and running to their mums.

#### Jessie's story

*Jessie ran over to his mum crying, 'Mum, quick are we going to die, I'm really scared?' Jessie is really upset and we can imagine his amygdala firing off all sorts of threat responses. Mum responds by holding Jessie tightly to her, stroking his hair and saying in a calm soothing voice, 'Don't worry, you're safe with me, it's a thunder and lightning storm and it does sound a bit loud and scary doesn't it? I can see why you're scared. That's OK. So let's collect our bags and get into the car and go home and we can have a nice cuddle on the sofa together until the storm passes.'* Jessie visibly calms down and his sobs become less intense as he relaxes

*in his mother's arms. You can imagine his threat system literally being calmed down by the validation, care and comfort it is receiving from the signals of touch and tone of voice from Jessie's mother. This is a big lesson in self-soothing for Jessie because although he doesn't know it, he is learning that his emotions are normal, that he is allowed to feel them and that they are valid and that there is a way to end them.*

### Jonnie's story

*So what happened to Jonnie, who was just as scared as his friend? He ran to his mum, sobbing, but his mum was talking on her mobile phone and seemed oblivious to her son's distress.*

*'Mum, Mum, I want to go home, I'm really scared.'*

*'Sssh, can't you see I'm talking on the phone?' says Mum.*

*'Please, Mum, please'.*

*'BE QUIET, don't be such a cry baby,' says Mum in a stern, irritated voice.*

*Mum turns her back to carry on talking on the phone. Jonnie is left sobbing and trying to cuddle his mum as she roughly pushes him away. So what do you think is going on in Johnnie's amygdala – feeling soothed or feeling more anxious, angry, unloved and unsafe? Johnnie will be experiencing all sorts of threat-based emotions such as fear, anger and sadness in response to his original fear; so rather than calm his 'threat system' down, his efforts to seek care and comfort leave him feeling more distressed, frightened, angry and ashamed as well as rejected by his mother. You can even imagine, in later years, that 'don't be such a cry baby' could become part of his self-critical repertoire.*

### Billy's story

*And finally, what happened to Billy? Well, he was also just as scared as his two little friends and he ran, sobbing, over to his mother, who was*

*sobbing with fear herself. 'Quick, Billy, run, run, Billy, before you get struck by the lightning,' she said, in an agitated high-pitched voice. Little Billy started running for his life into his mother's arms. She scooped him up and started saying with increasing levels of agitation, 'Oh my golly we've got to get home, sssh, there there, calm down, stop crying. Quick, let's get to the car, we might get hit, sssh everything's all right, here my poor baby.' She rocked Billy back and forth in a somewhat fretful manner in an attempt to calm her tearful son down. Did it work? Do you think Billy's amygdala got the message that he was safe? Probably not, as Billy would have picked up on his mother's signals of being anxious and become more anxious and clingy as he realized that his mother thought they were in danger too.*

Of the three examples of care giving in times of distress, Jessie probably has the best chance of developing self-soothing skills and being able to use them successfully as an adult to regulate threat in his world. How we (as children) experience the emotions of other people towards us becomes the foundation for how we feel about our self. We will believe ourselves to be lovable if we can call upon childhood memories of being treated in a loving way. This is also true of negative perceptions. We will believe ourselves unlovable if we can call upon childhood memories in which we were treated in unkind and unloving ways.