

Wellness - The ties that bind: Securing healthy relationships

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When we think of healthy relationships, especially around Valentine's Day, our thoughts often go to dating or marriage. We know it isn't always hearts and roses when it comes to relationships. It can be a lot of hard work and it doesn't always work. It might surprise us to know that the health of our adult relationships ties back to the earliest stages of life.

Long-standing research has shown that secure bonds of attachment between a baby and its caregiver play a significant role in a child's development. In one study, researchers observed mother rats who licked their baby rats, a form of maternal bonding. Those babies had higher levels of serotonin (a feel-good hormone) than baby rats who did not get slobbery kisses from their moms. Even more interesting, the pups licked by the mother experienced functional changes in their DNA; changes that altered how their brains and bodies responded to stress.

Former California Surgeon General, Nadine Burke-Harris, explains the rat experiment in her book, *The Deepest Well*, to highlight how positive, early life experiences impact the brain's ability to tolerate stress and manage emotions. Going back to our rat families, researchers were amazed to discover that even if baby rats were exposed to significant stress and trauma, if they had that bonding experience, they were less affected by it than rats without the stressful environment and no maternal bonding.

What does the rat experiment have to do with having healthy adult relationships? People who don't experience secure attachment during early stages of development tend to devote more energy to managing their emotions or protecting themselves emotionally, rather than using their energy to explore, learn and safely interact with others. Having the ability to recognize and manage our own emotional states and co-regulate those with other people is key to having healthy relationships. Along with having empathy, these are the basic qualities of Emotional Intelligence (EQ), which is also tied to greater academic and job success in life.

When early, secure attachment doesn't occur, other positive experiences can help fill the gap. Consistent, nurturing experiences in childcare and preschool environments and with extended family, neighbors and other community connections contribute to "licking our pups" and, thus, play a large role in helping kids build resilience and the foundation for strong and healthy relationships.

School bus drivers, teachers, staff, and counselors who interact with kids daily are often serving in these roles. We are fortunate to have trauma-informed educators and staff in Tillamook County, who understand and utilize these practices. We teach children the ABCs so they can learn to read and write. Increasingly, schools are integrating Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) to guide kids' understanding of how emotions drive their thinking and behavior. Early bonding and attachment are the ideal, but it is only one opportunity to support raising healthy and resilient humans.

Every community touchpoint matters. Programs such as Scouts, 4-H, youth sports and other positive outlets for kids, not only put them with nurturing mentors and coaches but also help them develop essential skills for managing emotions and working together with others. By the way, those programs are always looking for volunteers (hint, hint).

If we are struggling with maintaining healthy relationships, there is help and hope. Tillamook Family Counseling Center, along with all our local medical providers offer counseling. Tides of Change is a valuable resource for people who have experienced or are experiencing intimate partner violence or domestic abuse.

It's also important to remember that you are the only person you will be with your whole life. The healthiest relationship begins with us. We need to treat ourselves the way we would counsel a friend, with compassion, patience, and love.

References: Burke-Harris, N. (2020). *The Deepest Well*. Pan Macmillan.

Other wellness questions? Email us at info@tillamookcountywellness.org. For more local health and wellness information, visit www.tillamookcountywellness.org or follow Tillamook County Wellness on

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