

The Trouble With Trust

Many of us don't even realize why we can't trust others.

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Trust is the foundation of all human connections, from chance encounters to friendships and intimate relationships. It governs all the interactions we have with each other. No one would drive a car or walk down a sidewalk, or board a train or an airplane, if we didn't "trust" that other people took their responsibilities seriously, and would obey whatever rules applied to the endeavor at hand. We trust that other drivers will stay in their lanes, that conductors and pilots will be sober and alert. And that people will generally do their best to discharge their obligations toward us. Culture, civilization, and community all depend on such trust.

As Jeffry A. Simpson writes: "Trust involves the juxtaposition of people's loftiest hopes and aspirations with their deepest worries and fears." This description makes it clear why so many people have trouble trusting: For them, the benefits of closeness and intimacy are overshadowed by the possibility of pain and betrayal.

Initial assessments of whether someone is worthy of trust—the answer to the "friend or foe" question—happen automatically, outside of our consciousness, thanks to our evolutionary history. But the truth is that even in the context of intimate relationships, our responses are the result of working models we don't consciously perceive.

The human capacity for trust and trusting isn't meted out on an equal basis; some people are able to trust more easily than others and are, in fact, better at being trustworthy and judging trustworthiness. Once again, the nature of attachment to our caregivers in childhood—whether it's secure or insecure, and, within the insecure category, anxious or avoidant—determines how trusting we are, because these early attachments provide the working model of how we see the world and the people in it.

A child who learns the lesson that people close to her are reliable, can be trusted, and will take care of her goes out into the world with very different mental presentations and

expectations about human interaction than an insecurely attached peer. This secure-base script, according to Mario Mikulincer and his colleagues, has three components:

1. The assumption that if you need help, you can turn to someone you trust.
2. The assumption that if you need support, your close person will be there for you and happy to give it.
3. The recognition that you will be comforted and relieved by the support you're given.

All of these assumptions both rely on and bolster the ability to trust. In contrast, the anxiously attached, those exposed to a mother or caregiver who is inconsistent—sometimes a source of comfort and sometimes absent—worry that their partner won't be available or responsive at a time of need. They don't trust them to be present and are anxious about relying on them. The avoidantly attached individual—someone who has been neglected, rejected or even abused and thus avoids close contact—stays clear of relying on anyone for help because they don't trust at all, and they do what they can to remain autonomous.

Keep in mind that these mental representations aren't a function of conscious process. Trust or lack of it isn't produced through rational thought processes but are processed according to a mental script we may not even know we follow unless we have been in therapy or have come to a real understanding of how our childhood experiences have affected us. Even so, in the moment, we may not recognize the patterns.

A series of experiments by Harriet S. Waters and Everett Waters was startlingly clear in its findings about how these scripts or mental representations worked. Participants were given a list of words as prompts and were asked to write a story using these words. One sample set of words might have pertained to a baby's morning: *mother, baby, play, blanket, hug, smile, story, pretend, teddy bear, lost, found, and nap*. Those with securely attached bases told stories that were, generally, full of maternal interaction with a happy and satisfied baby, along with hugs and smiles, or a teddy bear that was momentarily lost and then found. Not so for the insecurely attached, who variously imagined a nervous mother who gets distracted and loses the teddy bear, or one who

watches the baby play with his blanket alone in his crib and decides to tell the baby a story but changes her mind when she can't find the teddy bear and the baby falls asleep alone in his crib. In this last narrative, the words 'hug' and "smile" were never even used by participants. The experiments also used prompts pertaining to adult situations—a car accident, for example— and found the narratives to be consistent depending on whether subjects had a secure base or not.

In an effort to go beyond the prompt-word technique, Mario Mikulincer, Philip Shaver, and others conducted eight experiments to study the secure-base script and discovered that it provided the framework through which people process information about their relationships, including expectations, memories and judgments. People with a secure base are more apt to be able to spot caring behaviors and are more accurate in their perceptions of their partners; they are also quicker to be understanding and forgiving if a partner disappoints them in some way.

Because our mental representations are automatic and not consciously perceived, we can combat their effect on how we interpret events and actions by bringing them into conscious awareness. If you have trouble trusting people, it may be helpful for you to focus on what you're bringing to the party. Are you interpreting your friend's or partner's words and gestures correctly—or do you tend to misread the cues and behaviors that indicate he or she actually *will* be there for you? Are you responding to your internalized script or to what's playing out in real time? Is it your script or the people you're choosing to associate with? Are they predictable? Can you count on them and, if you can't, why not?

As someone who has felt, firsthand, the sting of betrayal, I know that it isn't always easy to trust. But I'd like to think that I'm still open to the possibilities every close relationship offers and that, at that moment, the tattered script bequeathed from childhood can be tossed into the trash where it rightfully belongs.

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