

Listening In
 Lessons from Infants and Caregivers in Early Relational Health

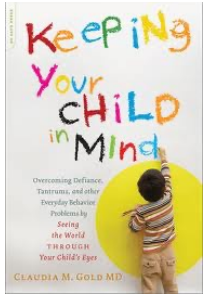
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My Origin Story:

- Pediatric Primary Care
- Berkshire Psychoanalytic Institute
- Infant Parent Mental Health/Early Relational Health



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Early Relational Health

- Research from the fields of child development, infant mental health, and neuroscience
- Identifies centrality of relationships between caregivers and very young children
- For current and future health, development, and social-emotional wellbeing.



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Early Relational Health

- Roots laid down in relationships in the child’s primary caregiving environment
- New relationships in a child’s expanding social environment have potential to support and enhance a child’s development

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Overview

- Listening In and the not-knowing stance
- Four perspectives of infant, caregiver, relationship, and culture
- Three core principles of early relational health

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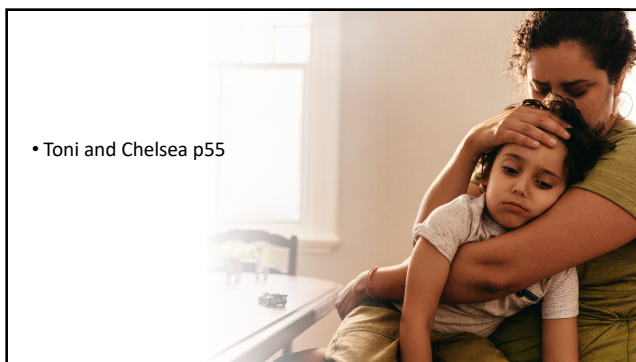


Source: Michael Jr. Productions . Listen to Your Father

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- Healthy relationships are characterized not by perfect attunement but by a messy process of mismatch and repair
- This continuous process builds resilience and trust
- The capacity for both self-regulation and intimacy grow from moment-to-moment interactions in our earliest relationships.
- These experiences change our brain and body, organizing the way we function in new relationships throughout our lives

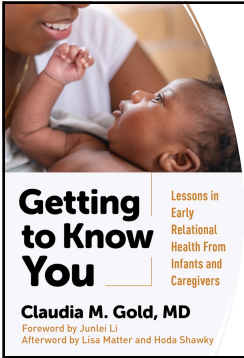
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- Just as parents are the authority with respect to their unique child, you are the authority with regards to your unique professional role and work setting.
- Rather than offering instruction, I will offer an approach rooted in scientific research
- Useful in whatever circumstances you find yourself in while interacting with infants and caregivers.

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Getting to Know You

Lessons in Early Relational Health From Infants and Caregivers

Claudia M. Gold, MD
Foreword by Junlei Li
Afterword by Lisa Matter and Hoda Shawky

From “what to do” to “how to be”

- For caregivers
- For educators
- For supervisors

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**Listening In:
An Organizing Frame**

- Listening with an intentional suspension of expectations and a willingness to be surprised
- In place of certainty, it embraces a humbleness of not knowing
- It calls for us to allow ourselves to feel awkward and uneasy— to make mistakes as we try to find our way into another person’s experience.

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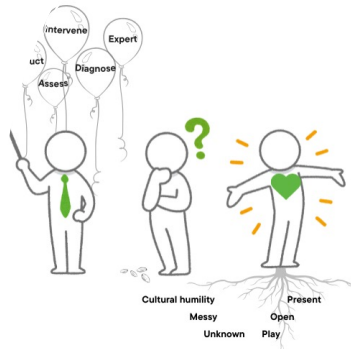
Letting go of the “expert” stance

- As a pediatrician I was taught to see my role as to inform parents, advise parents, educate parents.
- But time and again this approach led to a feeling of frustration and failure.
- Both for myself and the families I was trying to help.

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Intentional Stance of Not-Knowing

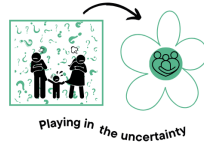
- An intentional stance of not-knowing can help to overcome hidden assumptions, allowing for a more authentic connection



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Playing in the Uncertainty

- Play as spontaneous, loosely organized behavior with no specified objective or consequence.
- Play is by nature uncertain.
- My very experience of not-knowing was the key that opened the door into a family's story.

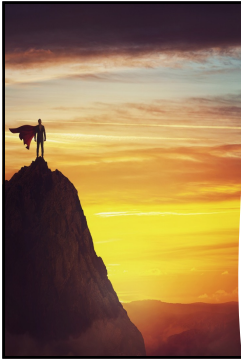


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"I do not wish to carry this attitude to absurd lengths"
D. W. Winnicott




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Not-knowing as our superpower!!!!

- The moments where we don't know what's going on, uncomfortable as they may be, are the ones that offer the most opportunity for connection, growth, and healing.

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Caregiver-Infant Relationship: Prototype of Not-Knowing

- Newborn infants have a tremendous capacity to communicate purpose and intention.
- Babies have unique ways of moving and responding to their environment.
- Their cues can be subtle
- Caregivers frequently miss their infant's signals.

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The Power of Not-Knowing

- The good news is that healthy development happens exactly because of these missed signals.
- As caregiver and infant move through misunderstanding to understanding, their connection deepens.
- At the same time a baby gets an increasingly clear and hopeful sense that "I am me!"

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Cultural Humility and the Not-Knowing Stance

- The term “cultural humility” in the healthcare world offers an alternative to “cultural competence”
- In place of certainty, it embraces a humbleness of not knowing
- Recognize that even in sameness there is difference

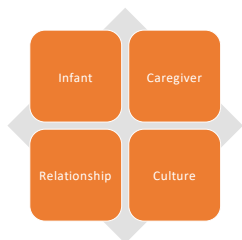
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Learning from Babies

- Cultural humility and early relational health united by core concept
- Stance of not-knowing
- Baby and caregiver as separate people get to know each other in messy- culturally embedded- process over time

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Four Perspectives: A Sampler



- Holding perspective of infant, caregiver, relationship and culture
- All in a frame of cultural humility and the not-knowing stance

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- Each of us—given our specific life story and professional role—will have different levels of identification with, or concern for, these varied perspectives.
- Aim to integrate all the varied viewpoints to apply them together in a moment of interaction.
- Some have more salience than others to a particular moment, issue, or problem.

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Lessons from Infants

- The unique human newborn
- Completely helpless
- Highly social



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Lessons from Infants

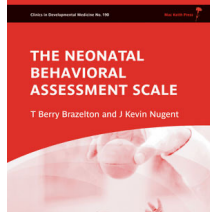
- “You’re such a little person already”
- “Stop, Look, Listen”



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Listening For the Infant’s Contribution

- Sensory processing
- State regulation



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Sensory processing

- As Brazelton was among the first to describe, newborn infants show unique ways of processing their sensory experience.
- For example, babies in a state of deep sleep have vastly different reactions to a rattle briefly but briskly shaken, or a light shone over their closed eyes.

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Sensory Processing

- Greatly influenced by my colleagues in occupational therapy
- Whether a child was 2 months, 2 years, or even 20 years old—I would often discover variations in sensory processing with profound impact on the infant-parent relationship
- These differences often appear early, typically showing themselves in differences in feeding, sleeping, and crying behavior.

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State Regulation

- Newborn infants have six unique states: deep sleep, active sleep, drowsy, awake and alert, fussy, and crying.
- Some babies transition smoothly from one to the other in a predictable organized way, while others may cry and cry only to suddenly fall into a deep sleep.
- These variations have significant impact on the caregiver's experience and on the relationship

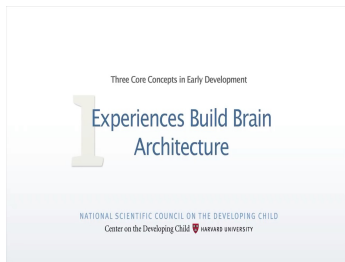
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Foundations of Lifelong Health are Built in Infancy

- Caregivers as baby brain builders
- Nature vs nurture: a modern perspective
- Early relationships influence all biological systems in the infant

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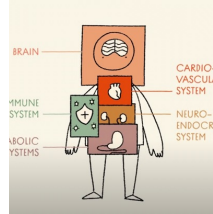
Caregivers as baby brain builders



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Early relationships influence all biological systems

- Different biological systems in the infant depend on each other and influence each other.
- The nervous system is the primary system to detect safety or stress in the environment.
- The signal is communicated to the cardiovascular system, the immune system, the neuroendocrine system, and the metabolic system.

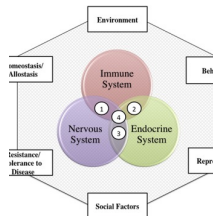


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Neuro-endocrine-immune system

- “Young children with natural creativity and high energy levels who are asked to conform to a rigid school structure probably do not think in words, *This is beyond my ability to cope*. Instead, they may develop flare-ups of eczema as their immune systems struggle to process the experience.”

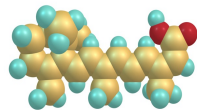
From The *Power of Discord*



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Nature vs nurture: a modern perspective

- Epigenetics puts a whole new spin on the nature versus nurture debate
- Genes and environment not separate, independent factors
- Unlike the genome, the epigenome can change rapidly in response to the environment.



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Changes to the Parent's brain

- Not only the infant's brain but also the caregiver's brain changes in the transition to parenthood



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Lessons from Caregivers



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Listening to caregivers

- Creating safety
- Promoting reflective functioning
- Listening for loss

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The dilemma of parent blaming

- In Western culture “parenting” has a competitive edge; a verb that describes something you do to your child.
- At the same time new parents are typically left with insufficient support in the perinatal period.
- These factors together create an environment in which parents are vulnerable to feeling blamed when things go wrong.

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Guilt, blame, and responsibility

- The not-knowing superpower—free from judgement or blame— serves to create a sense of trust.
- In turn, families open the door into a story that give meaning to the situation.

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Interactions as “neural exercise” From threat to safety



- “In the early education setting, a parent might raise a complex concern in the final moments of a parent–teacher conference when everyone was already rising out of their seats.”

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From Shame to Compassion



- A sense of shame in the parenting role can be experienced as threatening.
- A physiological response to threat leads caregivers to shut down, closing them off from the healing power of connection.
- “The feeling of safety is the treatment”

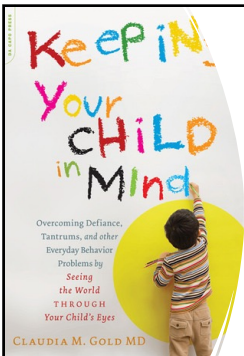
Stephen Porges, PhD

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Mentalization/Reflective functioning

- Uniquely human ability to attribute motivations and intentions to other’s behavior
- The shift in the caregiver from “I know” to “I wonder”—from certainty to curiosity
- Being “held in mind” promotes child’s capacity for regulation of emotion, social competence, and flexible thinking

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Holding a Child in Mind

- Curiosity
- Empathy
- Containment
- Self-regulation

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Facilitating Parental Reflective Functioning

- Holding parent in mind supports holding infant in mind
- Containing parent's experience supports containing infant's experience
- Listening to parent promotes listening to child

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Mentalization and the not-knowing stance

- Listen to a caregiver with the aim of supporting their ability to be curious about the motivations and intentions of their child's behavior.
- The not-knowing stance in relation to the caregiver facilitates a shift in the caregiver's attitude to the child's "problem behavior."
- In turn when a child feels "held in mind" behavior problems lessen, and relationships began to heal."

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What gets in the way?

- Adversity, trauma, and loss impede a caregiver's capacity for reflective functioning. .
- Three interrelated concepts
- Describe life experiences that disrupt development and exert negative impact on a family's health and wellbeing.

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Listening for Loss: Through Mourning to Connection

- The most important item in my office is a box of tissues, placed within easy reach.
- Interrupting the conversation, even just to hand them a tissue, can shut them down.
- I feel safe playing in uncertainty, knowing that if things get messy, tissues will be close at hand
- Expressions of deep sadness often propel families to moments of healing and connection.



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Elsa and George

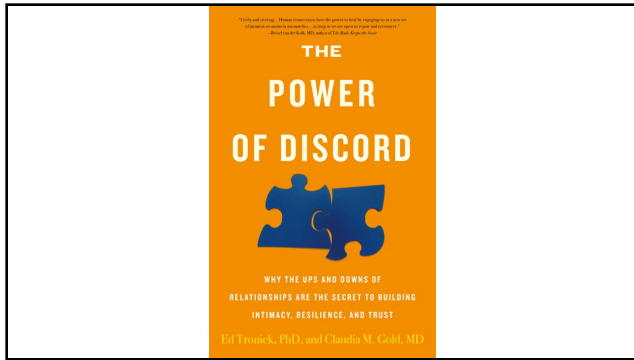
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Lessons from Relationships

- Infant and caregiver influence and change each other in moment-by-moment interactions over time.
- This microscopic interactive process embeds meaning in the child's body and brain well before they develop the capacity for language and thought

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Repair Theory of Human Development

- Healthy relationships are characterized not by perfect attunement but by a messy process of mismatch and repair
- This continuous process builds resilience and trust
- The capacity for both self-regulation and intimacy grow from moment-to-moment interactions in our earliest relationships.
- These experiences change our brain and body, organizing the way we function in new relationships throughout our lives

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Repair Theory: Implications

- Early interactions lacking in robust repair may lead to emotional suffering and derailed development
- New sets of relationships with different quality of interactions can promote healing and growth throughout the lifespan

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Evidence: Still-face paradigm



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The still-face paradigm

- At first viewing, the still-face experiment can generate worry, pain, and fear as we are moved by the infant's experience of loss.
- The primary message of the still-face is one of hope.
- The baby communicates in her quick recovery that this experience of mismatch, while magnified and dramatic in the experiment, is familiar to her.
- She knows what to do to engage her mother. She has done this many times before but in ways that went unnoticed.

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The 70-30 Discovery

- Frame-by-frame analysis of videos of typical infant-caregiver pairs offered a window into the moment-to- moment interactions that one could not appreciate in real time.
- Tronick expected to see healthy mother-infant pairs in perfect attunement.
- But after months of research, the actual pattern was undeniable —as many as 70 percent of the interactions were out of sync.

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**Mismatch is the norm.
Relationships are achieved not assumed.**

70% Attunement
30% Mismatch and Repair

The 70-30 Discovery

- These findings have been replicated in research over decades in a wide variety of settings and applications

Frankel, E. J., & Garino, A. (2006). Interactive mismatch and repair: Challenges to the coping infant. *Zero to Three, 42*(1), 1-6.

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The Power of Repair

- Repair leads to a feeling of pleasure, trust, and security, the implicit knowledge that *"I can overcome problems."*
- Repair teaches a critical life lesson: The negative feeling that arises from a mismatch can be changed into a positive feeling when two people subsequently achieve a match.
- Countless repairs build a core sense of agency and hope.

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Repair and the Not-Knowing Stance

- Mismatch allows for repair
- "Understanding misunderstanding"
- Caregiver-infant relationships
- Practitioner-caregiver relationships

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Mismatch-repair in the childcare setting

- "Simple Interactions"
- Junlei Li
- P 142

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Mismatch-Repair Derailed: Child Factors

- Sensory processing and state regulation differences
- Cues difficult to read
- Crying, sleep, and feeding issues
- Genetic, epigenetic, prematurity, drug effects

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Mismatch-Repair Derailed: Caregiver Factors

- Parental mental illness
- Marital Conflict
- Intimate Partner Violence
- Substance Abuse
- Trauma and Loss

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Early Experience is not “Baked in the Cake”

- New relationships with ample opportunity for mismatch and repair create new meanings that change our brain and body across the lifespan



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Lessons from Culture

- A set of shared activities, values, goals, and practices—that is, a common way of being in the world



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Mismatch-repair derailed: Sociocultural Issues

- Poverty
- Historical trauma
- Systemic racism and discrimination
- War
- Climate trauma and displacement

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Lessons from Culture

- Culture of historical trauma
- Culture of parental care
- Culture of early relational care

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Historical trauma is alive in the present.

- Racism
- War
- Covid-19
- Climate related displacement and loss

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My Back Story

"My family's ghosts were murdered in the Russian pogroms of the early 1900s and gas chambers of Germany in the 1940s, but they never discussed loss. As my ghosts were transformed into ancestors, I grew to recognize how my parents protected themselves from unfathomable grief by insisting that "everything is OK." For them, this stance was adaptive.

But for me as a child I felt perpetually in the dark, unable to manage my feelings of worry, anger, or sadness. Sensing from my parents that the full range of my emotions were not acceptable, I lived with an almost unbearable existential anxiety that I could not be my full self.

Not wanting other children to experience this kind of pain, I have made it my life's work to offer a safe space for families to play in the uncertainty and speak the unspeakable. Together, we can tear down the façade that "everything is OK." Once parents can share and release their own grief, they can better hear their children. And by being heard, a child can fully blossom"

From Getting to Know You

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The culture of parental care

- The way a society treats its caregivers directly impacts the physical and emotional health of subsequent generations.

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Early Relational Health and Material Hardship

- Caregivers preoccupied with worries about diapers, housing, food, and other “material hardships”

- “Material hardship is bad for early relational health”

Dr. Philip Fisher, RAPID survey project

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Culture of Early Relational Care

- We need to value—emotionally and financially— the workforce that supports early relational health in proportion to their role in promoting the health and wellbeing of the next generation.

- *The Daycare Myth* by Dan Wuori

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Reflective supervision in childcare setting

- Early childhood educators typically receive little to no emotional support in their roles.
- Reflective supervision has been shown to have value in the setting of early education and care.

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Finding Hope

- We've travelled from the perspective of the individual infant, to that of the caregiver, to the relationship, and then to the larger social and cultural context.
- In conclusion, I'm going to shift our view back to high magnification.
- The baby brings us fully into the present moment

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Moment of Meeting

- Moment when infant and caregiver feel fully recognized
- A moment in time in an evolving process of missed cues and miscommunication in search of a new moment of meeting



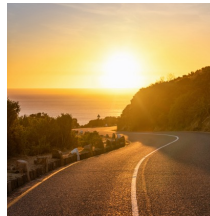
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Moments of Meeting

- No matter how messy the situation, a singular focus on facilitating moments of connection brings a sense of calm purpose to the work.
- Such moments can produce extraordinary changes, shifting the narrative from anger and disconnection to possibility for healing and growth.

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- When we open ourselves to not-knowing
- Each interaction has potential for producing transformative energy
- Creating a renewed sense of hope



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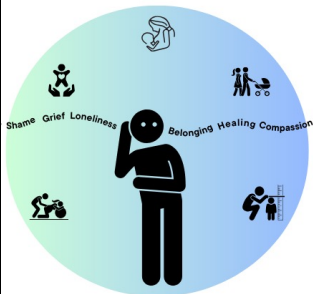
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Thank You



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