



You are the key

Stress Detective Series for Leaders

Hi everyone. This is Dr. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak, and this is the [fourth](#) in a four-part series that I've been calling "The Stress Detective Series for Leaders". It's a series about how we can be the most effective leader possible, especially during times that are challenging, or when things are so uncertain, that our lid likes to flip all the time. This whole series has been building upon what neuroscientists and others call the Four S's, and the Four S's are safe, seen, soothed, and secure. And this is really pulling from the work of Dr. Dan Siegel, Dr. Tina Payne Bryson, in terms of what we think of attachment science and those Four S's in particular. We're also building upon the work of Dr. Stuart Shanker from The MEHRIT Center, and we're really thinking about what are stressors? What does it mean that we have stressors that are impacting our ability to stay regulated? And his definition of self reg, which is really managing the energy intention of these stressors.

And so, as we dive into this particular episode, I wanted to start off with a quote from, of course, the amazing Fred Rogers. I think it sets the tone for what we mean by secure, really well. So Fred Rogers said, "If you could only sense how important you are in the lives of those, you meet, how important you can be to the people you may never even dream of, there is something of yourself that you leave at every meeting with another person." So being secure is really about this human to human stuff. So whether we're virtual or we're in person, we really need to think about our role as a leader. What is it that we're doing to create a secure attachment?

So, as we have in the past, I'm going to talk about what are the characteristics or the synonyms, if you will, of what it means to have a secure attachment. We'll cross-reference that with what are the actions that leaders take to create that environment, to ensure that people have secure attachments, and you may be thinking, "But I work with adults, aren't attachments formed early in life?" Yes, absolutely, but as we know, things around self-regulation and the ability to cope, really happens across the lifespan. So even for those of us who work with adults who seemingly have an intact prefrontal cortex, it's still our job to help co-regulate at times, and we'll come back to that. And then we're going to talk about three strategies that promote secure attachments, as we're working with adult professionals, and we're going to talk about making deposits to relational trust funds, how we develop and model mindsight, and then how we promote resilience.

So let's start off with, what does it mean to have a secure attachment? So when we think about our work with children, and when I talk with my colleague, Barb Avila, she always thinks about secure attachments as children's ability to say yes to the world. It's really the culmination of the other S's. So before, we talked about being safe, seen, and soothed, and when you have all of those, it really creates this secure attachment, but as Barb says, it's your way of saying yes to the world. So that means that you have this internalized sense of well-being. An internalized sense of well-being is sort of that notion that Dan Siegel talks about, of the river of

well-being, and that really, that analogy helps me. It's not that I'm at the bank or the sideline that is rigid, and I'm not at the bank or the sideline that is chaos, but I'm absolutely in the flow. I'm in that middle of where I have well-being.

Dan Siegel also, and Tina Payne Bryson have an acronym that they talk about in terms of well-being, and they use the word faces, or the acronym FACES, that we are flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized, and stable. So that's each letter of FACES: flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized, and stable. Also based upon Barb Avila's work, when she talks about having a secure attachment, is this ability to try things out, to deal with things, as Stuart Shanker would say, is the ability to manage stressors. It's really that ability to navigate, and when I think about navigate, especially when it's uncertain, or when things are chaotic, or even when things are really rigid, how do you navigate when things are totally preset or things are totally upset?

And so, as I hear people talk about that this is the new norm, or that we have to adjust or accept the new norm, or that we have to pivot because things are changing rapidly, sometimes I get really annoyed at the word pivot, but I do think it is speaking to being able to be highly responsive, this ability to navigate, shift, redirect, rethink, come back. And so, the more we make plans that are set in stone, "This is what I've said, and this is what we're going to do," the less that we're able to pivot, then we are going to struggle with our interactions, and our lids are going to flip, and all kinds of negative consequences will result, because what we really need to do is to be able to change course and abandon ship when needed, and maybe get into a different boat.

So there's all these kind of analogies about we have this safe harbor and now we've gone out to sea, but now we're in uncharted territory. But when we try to make it too rigid, or we allow it to stay too chaotic, "Well, it's going to change anyway. Let's not make any plans," neither one of those serves us well. So we really want to feel good in our own skin, and we want this ability to join others in really healthy relationships. All of those things are synonyms, or ways of thinking of having secure attachments.

So what do we, as leaders, do to create that sense that people feel like they're in a secure attachment or a secure relationship, or that they can feel good in their own skin, especially during times of uncertainty, when things do feel like chaos, and the only antidote feels like we have to counter it with rigidity? So one of the first things we do, is that we have to be curious about our own reactions. Why are we reacting to, "We have to have it this way?" Or why are we reacting to someone else's plan in the way that we are? Or why are we reacting to someone's inaction? That is first and foremost on us. We have to get curious about our own reactions.

We also have to just hone in and get super aware of what Parker Palmer will always refer to as our shadow self, the shadow of our leadership. This is where our biases, whether they're implicit or not, where they're showing up, where we're judging, where we're making assumptions about things, where we are allowing the white dominant culture to continue to dominate, where we are feeling powerless, so we

just sort of put our hands in the air and say, "But I'm just one person. What can I do about oppression?" We have to become really aware of those biases and that shadow, and that's part of our emotional intelligence, so that we can then feel like, "Okay, how do I advocate? How do I create alliances, or get together in a group to solve this?" Versus, "I have to figure it out all on my own."

This leads to sort of what we don't do as a leader. So we're not defensive, we're not rigid, we're not chaotic. So while we want to be consistent and reliable, just like with children, we want to have boundaries that breathe. We really want to make sure that we're aware of those biases, aware when we're being defensive, aware when we're having a reaction, and instead of judging ourselves or others, get really curious about it, still be consistent and still be reliable.

This means that we need to connect emotionally to other people, and whether we're virtual or in person, we need to really think about, how am I connecting with this other person emotionally? Do I need to clarify the boundaries? Do I need to help them plan what we're going to do next? Maybe I haven't spelled it out clearly enough, or used visual supports to allow them to see what we're going to do. Do they understand that this is the plan for right now, but that we may need to change again? Do I need to show plan A, B and C? Do I have enough input from everyone that we understand what our next step is?

And then maybe most importantly, the last thing that a good leader does to form these secure attachments, is that they forgive others, certainly, when there has been sort of a breakdown in the relationship or the communication, and then really over that, is that they seek to repair when they've done something that's caused harm, when they weren't their best selves, when their lid flipped, when they weren't the safe harbor, when they didn't see someone, when they didn't have the capacity to soothe another. Then we have to seek repair and say, "Hey, I wasn't my best self, and I'm going to try to do better next time. What can I do to support you during this difficult time? I didn't see you yesterday. I was in my own mind, caught up with my own shark music. What can I do going forward to understand that this is really a problem for you, or a high stressor for you?"

And so, that notion of repair is absolutely necessary, whether we're a parent and repairing with children, we're colleague to colleague, or we're leading a group of staff through those uncharted territories. So that's sort of that left side and right side of those downloads and handouts, of what does it mean to feel secure, and then on the right side, how do I ensure as a leader, that others feel secure? And then that brings us to the three more specific strategies, and I'll put links to additional resources related to each of these.

So the first strategy is that we make deposits to the relational trust fund. So relational trust is again, that human to human interaction. As Isela Garcia, one of my favorite friends and colleagues who talks about being openhearted and wholehearted, this is this idea of, "I opened my door to you, but I've also opened my heart to you." And so, as Parker Palmer would say, we're really making a commitment to another person, and we're showing up as our authentic self, and

having a great deal of integrity. So whenever you are acting from a place that is making a commitment, that is your authentic self, that is openhearted, you're making a deposit into the relational trust that you have with your staff, and your colleagues, and your families.

The second strategy is to develop, or maybe model, and maybe it's always better to think about how we can show versus tell, that we have mindsight skills. And mindsight, it comes again from the work of Dan Siegel, and this is really understanding our own inner workings, and inner thoughts, and inner going-ons, as well as the other person's mind, so that we get off of autopilot, we get off of our habits, and as he would say, "Name it to tame it." We become aware of what's going on, and we name it to tame it. In my work with Beth and J. Lo has really been around "name it", "tame it", and then "reframe it". So I'll put a link to our work around reframing challenges, so that you can see the sort of stepping stones are, "I'm aware of it, so I can name it. I've named it, so now I can tame it, and there may be another step in there that helps me feel not so scared about it, and then I can reframe it."

The third strategy that a good leader, an effective leader, a strong leader, I'm not sure what adjective is the best to use, but the leader that we want to show up in our lives, and who we want to show up as leaders, really promotes resilience. So resilience is this ability to stay in the green zone. It's that ability to notice that we're about to leave the green, and go into the red or the blue, and not only do we notice it, but we're able to put the brakes on, and stay in the green zone. It may be that we need to rely on others.

And so my colleague, Julie Costin, helps me all the time when I either say I'm about to leave the green zone, or she notices it, she'll give me an opportunity to do what we call one and done. She'll say, "Just do one more thing on your list, and then let's be done for the day." It just sort of gives me permission to not just keep pushing through, and not just keep doing more and picking up more, and taking on more because then I'm not my best self. I'm not showing up for other people. I'm not modeling staying in the green zone.

So we really want to widen our window of tolerance, but not by persistence through doing hard things, or just riding really high at the green or really low at the green, and seeing how long we can stay there. It's really depleting on the system, and we need to restore it in some way, and then that might mean that we need to employ coping strategies. We may need to offer lifelines or coping strategies to our colleagues, help them identify coping strategies, as Julie does for me, and then we may need to co-regulate. They may really need us to not only invite them, but to actually rely on us to co-regulate.

And that's not just in our work with young children, that's across the lifespan. And I think too often, we as leaders, forget that adults are going to continue to rely upon us. That doesn't mean we have to fix it, solve it, pick up their burdens, take them on as our own, but it does mean we need to show up and be ready to co-regulate. And

I'll put a few more links to what it means to co-regulate in the post to this recording, so that you have good resources on how you can co-regulate.

And then as we wrap this part of the series up, the best way I can describe how a leader forms secure attachments, is through a paradox. And so, paradoxes are where both things are true at the same time. It makes your brain kind of hurt when you think about a paradox. Something like a crash landing, that's a paradox, but even broader than that, just in these kinds of sayings that we have, a paradox is the both/and. I used to really see the both/and from Parker Palmer's work, as this ability to find consensus, or agreement, or the middle way. But in my work with Ijumaa Jordan, I've really seen that the paradox is really saying that two things that are almost conflicting, like they just can't go together, are actually both true at the same time.

So let me give you a really good example that she shared the other day, and then I'll wrap it up on secure attachments. So she was talking about racism and equity in early childhood, and our images and conversations around the police, around our judicial system and so forth. And so, people will often say to her, "Yeah, but I know this police officer who's really good, and I know that there may be bad cops, but he's a really good one," and so forth and so on, or someone might say, "But I know a cop who's black. How can cops be racist, or how can the justice system be oppressing others, when the cops are black?"

And so, in a very oversimplified way of what she'll teach you, it's that there can be a cop who is good and/or black, and at the same time, because they're a cop, they work in a system that is flawed, in a system that is systemically oppressing others, in particular, blacks, indigenous, people of color. And so, if you can kind of get your head wrapped around that someone can be a person of color and a cop at the same time, that that's sort of that both/and.

And so for me, when I think about forming secure attachments and looking at this paradox, the both/and, to use the language or the metaphor of Dan Siegel, you are both the safe harbor, and you're the launching pad. So think about that for a minute. A safe harbor is where you would come in, where you would park, where you would dock, where you would stay put. A launching pad is the opposite. The launching pad is like, get here to lift off, to leave, to jump off. And so at the same point in time, as a parent, as a caregiver, as a teacher, as a leader, you are both to your staff. You are both the safe harbor, where they come in and dock, and you are also the launching pad, the place that allows others to do all of those things on the left hand side, or the first series of things I listed, the things that allow people to deal with, to manage, to navigate, to feel good, to join others in a human relationship.

So I hope that you have found this series to be provocative in ways, validating in other ways, and then downright practical in a lot of ways, so that you can show up each and every day for those amazing humans who you serve.