The role of attachment and relationships in NSSI

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What is attachment?

• Attachment is based on learned behavioural responses from key attachment figures when seeking proximity in times of threat
• The attachment system is designed to increases chances of survival
• The dyadic interactions between a child and their attachment figure(s) begin got set in motion excitation and inhibition of certain neurological response that underlie arousal modulation (part of emotion regulation)
• If an attachment figure responds consistently to a child’s attachment needs, then the child is likely to develop a secure attachment; and associated schema/beliefs develop
  • Being deserving of love (self)
  • Belief that others will support you in times of need (others)
  • Highlights the importance of emotional availability, and sensitivity to distress

What is attachment? Continued...

• Related to two dimensions of developing beliefs re. self & others (Brennan et al., 1998):
  • Anxiety over abandonment*
  • Avoidance of intimacy

* Linked in the theoretical literature to NSSI (see Fung, 2008: DSH as an external manifestation of fear of abandonment)
* Fear of abandonment associated with BPD; which is often characterised by NSSI behaviour.
Baby monkeys will gravitate towards the cloth surrogate mother rather than the wire surrogate mother, even when the wire mother is where the monkey receives milk. The monkey is more likely to attach to the surrogate that is more “comforting”.

Figure 5. Time spent on cloth and wire mother surrogates.

Harry Harlow, 1962
Attachment in adolescence

• A positive attachment relationship between parent(s) and an adolescent, characterised by warmth and responsiveness, is linked to a more consistent and mature identity.

• Secure attachment to parental figure requires (Ainsworth, 1989):
  • Open communication
  • Parent being accessible
  • Parent provides help and protection when needed

• Ruptures in the parent-child attachment in adolescents can be repaired (see Diamond et al., 2003)
  • Therapy that enhances communication, warmth and increases trust.
What is your experience?

• How would you describe the attachment relationships of youth who self-injure?
Insecure attachment and NSSI

• Both associated with
  • Difficulty managing anger
  • Difficulty navigating social interactions
  • Difficulty regulating emotions
  • Abuse and neglect
  • Difficulties in identity formation
Attachment relationships and NSSI

- Research suggests that poor attachment (to parents, and to romantic partner when older) in childhood (measured retrospectively) increases the risk of NSSI (e.g. Gratz et al., 2003).

- Adolescent NSSI is associated with higher levels of parental criticism (Wedig & Nock, 2007; Yates et al., 2008).

- Adolescent NSSI is linked to poorer quality relationships with parents, characterised by less trust, poorer communication, and alienation (see Hilt et al., 2008).
Attachment indirectly impacts on NSSI risk?

• Research suggests:

1. Poor attachment is related to increased risk of NSSI, via decreased capacity for emotion regulation (e.g. Adrian et al., 2011)

   This is consistent with Linehan’s biopsychosocial: An invalidating environment (combined with biological vulnerability) increases emotion dysregulation, which in turn increases risk of self-injury.

2. Poor parental-child relationships is indirectly related to higher rates of NSSI via the negative impact on identity formation (e.g. Gandhi et al., 2016)
N= 1331
79 with hx NSSI in past 6 months. Introductory level Psyc students

Relationship difficulties with peers and parents indirectly associated with NSSI, via emotion dysregulation. Parent alienation (i.e. “belief that parents cannot be relied upon in times of distress”) particularly important.

An invalidating social environment decreases emotion regulation, which increases the likelihood of NSSI (Linehan)

NB: Cross-sectional

Yurkowski, Martin, Levesque, Bureau, Lafontaine & Cloutier, 2015
What our data suggests....

• Cross-sectional, school wide data.
• 13 – 18 year olds
Correlations between Attachment, NSSI, and suicidality (Cross year-group sample; 13 – 18 yrs)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Attachment to parents</th>
<th>Attachment to peers</th>
<th>Attachment to romantic partner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NSSI (average)</td>
<td>-0.29**</td>
<td>-0.09 (ns)</td>
<td>-0.21 (ns) NB: N=55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSSI Identity</td>
<td>-0.32**</td>
<td>-0.16 (ns)</td>
<td>-0.08 (ns) NB: N=51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicidality (SBQ total score)</td>
<td>-0.41**</td>
<td>-0.34**</td>
<td>-0.25**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p<.01
New Zealand based sample
N= 665
Across Year groups: age range 13 -18yr
Mean age: 15.5

Poor peer attachment is associated with increased NSSI, but this is buffered by strong parental attachment

If an adolescent has strong parental attachments, then poor peer attachment is less of a risk factor for NSSI.
What about feeling able to talk to others when in need of support?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Being able to talk to (Y/N)...</th>
<th>Average NSSI</th>
<th>SBQ score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Higher if can’t talk to parent(s)</td>
<td>Higher if can’t talk to parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparents</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>Higher if can’t talk to grandparents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>Higher if can’t talk to teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended family member</td>
<td>Borders significance (p=.07) (may be lower if can seek support)</td>
<td>Higher is can’t talk to extended family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports coach</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>Higher is can’t talk to sports coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family friend</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>Higher if can’t talk to family friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counsellor</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>Higher if can’t talk to counsellor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Qualitative studies: Youth interviews

• We’ve conducted several youth interviews over the course of YWS
• Themes related to difficult home life
  • Related to NSSI as serving a communicative function
    • Legitimate form of communication; e.g. ‘cry for help’
      vs ‘just’ attention-seeking (trivialised and minimised)
I don’t know, um (.) I think sometimes people, like if they were doing it for attention they might, have really tough home lives and they never get, you know they- they never get to talk to anyone so they- that’s the only way people get attention, or same thing if people have bad home lives and they get depressed, or something’s going on at school or in relationships they might do that

But then, you’ll see hundreds a people just looking for attention but you don’t know if they’re looking for attention or if they’re serious, just implying that kind of stuff (P2: yeah)
• How does the idea of ‘attention seeking’ fit with the proposed idea that NSSI is an expression of ‘fear of abandonment’ (under an attachment model)?

• Are individuals who self-injure then potentially particularly sensitive to signs that others’ may not consider their concerns and needs legitimate?
Youth participants highlighted the role of parents....

• I spose they can kind of make an effort to- kind of be empathetic and more sympathetic and kind of- try to understand it first before they go in and judge it, again like kind of try and restrict that negativity around it to make the person feel maybe more confident and calm about talking about it... I think if maybe parents and adults have more of an idea of what it is and how it’s caused, (I: mm) keep an eye out for sort-of, the signs about how someone is, feeling, and kind of approach it and say y’know ‘if there’s anything wrong’- don’t y’know accuse them of anything ‘if there’s anything wrong, I’m always here I’m not going to judge’ and kind of maybe constantly- not s- not so constant that it’s annoying, but just kind of keep reminding them that person that everything will be okay, I’m here, y’know don’t, shut everything in, (I: yep) don’t keep it to yourself, I spose like it’s just building a strong relationship with the people and adults around you and kind-of (. ) give out the messages that everything is kind-of, I don’t know- o- open to talk about, I don’t know yeah ((laughs))
Youth participants emphasised the importance of trust from an early age.

• *You have to start from a young age, you have to be accepting of everything they do for them to be comfortable to tell you this stuff* (P1: yeah, I-) *cos this is some hard stuff.*
Summary

• Attachment is important for developing emotional competence and emotion regulation

• Poor attachment, and poor relationship quality (particularly with parents) is linked to greater risk of NSSI

• Parental relationships are best cultivated early, however there is room for repair if ruptures occur

• Attachment and supportive relationships may be even more important for buffering suicide risk

• The social response to NSSI (e.g. as attention seeking) may be furthering real (or subjective sense of) isolation, therefore increasing risk (especially given the possible link between NSSI and fear of abandonment)
References


